COME WITH ME INTO BABYLON

A STORY OF THE FALL OF NINEVEH

JOSIAH
M
WARD

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To
Mr W. G. Vines
From His
Lady Friends
At The A. T. Lewis & Son D. G. Co
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Colo
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1902

Come With Me Into Babylon

"THE DEATH OF SIN-SAR-ISKUN."—*Page 405.*

COME WITH ME INTO BABYLON

A STORY OF THE FALL OF NINEVEH . BY JOSIAH M. WARD · ILLUSTRATED BY JAMES E. McBURNEY AND W. B. GILBERT

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PREFACE

AROUND the vanishing Nineveh have clustered some very interesting Greek legends which passed current until modern exploration relegated them to the limbo of history with the fables of Semiramis and of Cyrus's midnight entry into Babylon. Not even the exact date of this unparallelled collapse of a nation is accurately known. The exact manner of the capture of the city is equally obscure, and the Greek tradition merely confuses. I have accepted the date 606 B. C. for the obliteration of the Assyrian Empire, the Book of Nahum as a descriptive foundation, and part of the Greek myth as adventitious pigment. In the matter of proper names it was found convenient to curtail the polysyllabic Assyrian and Babylonian titles, and also to use the commonly accepted forms. Nebuchadnezzar, for instance, would hardly be recognized under his Babylonian name of Nabu-Kudur-utsur. With Assurbanipal, however, the correct reading was preferred to the biblical Asnapper or the Greek Sardanapalus. It was not Assurbanipal, it may be added, who made a sacrifice of himself and perished with Nineveh, but Sin-sar-iskun —probably his grandson. A question still unsettled is the ancestry of Nebuchadnezzar, with which I have taken a few liberties. As the Sargonidæ are alluded to in several passages, this list of the Kings of that dynasty, with the dates of their accession, may be of interest:

Sargon, usurper.....	722	B. C.
Sennacherib	705	B. C.
Esarhaddon	681	B. C.
Assurbanipal	668	B. C.

Assurbanipal died c. 640, and was succeeded by a son. Here set in the twilight that preceded the eclipse of Assyrian history.

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Come With Me Into Babylon

Book I

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BOOK I

Chapter I

A MEETING IN BABYLON AT NIGHT

THE torches at the doors and gateways had burned out, and silence lay upon the streets of Babylon. It was the evening of the eighth day of the vernal festival of Zagmuku, and rejoicing multitudes were gathered in the precinct of Su-anu-ki, where, in the midst of the grove of Istar, the Temple of Bel reared its lofty head. In many private residences banquets were being held.

On a side street running from the Euphrates to the Avenue of the Temple a horseman slowly moved. He bore a tufted lance, and his keen and restless eye sought to penetrate the places unillumined by the clear moonlight. The animal he bestrode was nervous from the sights and sounds of unaccustomed surroundings. Her long and slender ears pointed forward inquiringly, and her high nostrils were widely dilated.

"Gently, mistress!" softly spoke her rider in Aramaic, patting her arching neck. "Art thou a wild ass of the desert to fear the night?"

Soothed by the familiar voice, the mare proceeded with less uneasiness. Her rider was young and modestly, almost poorly, dressed; but the bit of his horse's bridle and the handle of his sword and dagger were of worked gold. His heavy cloak was of Damascus make, and the turban whose ends fell upon his shoulder had the sheen

of silk. Of the Damascus fashion also was his tunic, and the long greaves that encased his legs were such as warriors wore.

Horse and rider came out upon the broad avenue at a spot midway between the temple and the palace of the king. East, north, and south the trees and shrubbery of the great parked roadway shut off the view, and the young man stopped and peered into the bosky obscurity. His scrutiny satisfied him as to his course, and, striking across the thoroughfare, he perceived on the farther side a narrow street bordered by the high walls of two estates. Into this he rode without hesitation.

As they neared the next street the mare stopped short. Her master leaned forward and listened. He thought he heard the patter of running feet, but, recollecting that he was in a city, smiled to himself and playfully expostulated with his four-footed companion for her timidity.

"Must every noise affright thee, Martha? Onward, comrade!"

The intelligent animal indicated by the tossing of her head that she understood the reproof, yet she moved not. Her master now distinctly heard some one rapidly approaching. No outcry warned him of what was afoot, and he threw his lance into position for any emergency. Just then a woman darted around the nearest corner, and hurrying footfalls in the direction whence she emerged indicated that she was being pursued. Stumbling and gasping for breath, she ran to him and, with a cry of "Save me!" fell at the horse's feet. The mare remained motionless.

The rider jumped to the ground and had barely time to place himself in front of the prostrate woman when out of the same street rushed an armed soldier. Seeing a man with a lance barring his way, he drew his sword and brandished it threateningly.

"Stop!"

The command was stern and sharp, and the lance head was an ominous point.

"Yield thee, Jew!" the soldier responded, not lessening his speed or lowering his weapon.

Refraining from utilising the advantage his lance gave him, the young man stepped nimbly aside as his opponent closed in, and dexterously swept him away with a quick swing of the long weapon, which he immediately dropped and then pulled his sword.

At the moment a second pursuer rounded the corner,—a priest, who halted at the sight of naked weapons and awaited the outcome.

"Zeus!" exclaimed the assailant in hot anger, and he made another onslaught. This time his sword in its downward swoop was caught lightly on the other blade and warded off with an ease that astonished him.

"Curses upon thee!" he spluttered. "I have an engagement to kill thee."

The young man evidently thought it needless to ask further explanations. As his assailant again lunged at him he parried the blow, drove his own sword through his opponent's body, and quickly drew it back for another thrust.

The stricken man stared at the stranger with wide-open eyes, dropped his weapon, and lurched helplessly forward. "Assuredly I shall kill thee," he gasped, as he sank to his knees. "If hereafter I meet thee and—the—gods——"

With that he fell to the ground.

The attack and repulse had consumed scarcely a minute of time, and when it was over the priest turned and vanished.

There was another observer of the last part of this scene,—an elderly man who had ridden unperceived from the Avenue of the Temple on a velvet-footed camel.

"Ha! Aramean," said the newcomer in a haughty voice, "Dost kill and pillage in the streets of Babylon?"

The young man did not reply. He observed two more small, lightly made camels advancing toward them. One

was a pack animal with an unoccupied saddle. An armed retainer was seated upon the other.

"Thy tribe?" demanded the older man.

The manner of the inquiry moved the victor to wrath. Fiercely seizing his lance, he elevated its tufted point, at once answering and defying his questioner.

"Peace, Nabathean," said the elder, identifying the tribe of Arameans by the tuft. He tapped the camel's knee with the long stick which he carried in his hand. The camel knelt, and he alighted.

"Thou knowest the children of Aram?" the lance-bearer asked.

"Omar, the son of Egibi am I, blood-brother of the noble Mathan, thy king."

The young man lowered the lance. "And I," said he gravely, "am Talmai, son of Mathan, here to seek Omar surnamed the Wise."

"By the rod of affliction!" responded the elder, embracing him, "thou dost find me none too soon. Why this brawl, and who this woman?"

The other briefly explained. Omar bent over and felt the wrist of the unconscious woman. "A flask of perfume, Jehu," said he to his attendant. "How fared thy opponent?" Then, turning to the fallen man, and noting the pattern of his tunic, he exclaimed: "The plaid of Prince Nebuzaradan! Our feet are swiftly running to mischief. The other, sayest thou, was a priest?"

"His garb was that of a priest."

"The woman may enlighten us."

Taking the flask from his servant, he knelt beside her motionless form and removed the veil which covered her head.

While the older man was thus engaged a shining object in the dust caught the eye of the younger. He picked it up, and on rubbing off the earthy coating, beheld a gem of extraordinary size and brilliancy, oblong in shape. The elder, rising, looked at it in wonder.

"It is a ruby," he remarked slowly. "'Tis said that

of all jewels the amulet of Bel is the most precious. If it excels this ruby, then indeed is the saying true. Retain it, son of Mathan, for the owner when he appears."

Talmai put the stone in the bosom of his tunic.

The woman stirred and moaned, and they raised her to her feet. The men observed that her robe was of the richest texture, and the soft light of the moon revealed a face of surpassing loveliness.

With the opening of her eyes came recollection. Freeing one hand, she plucked a dagger from her girdle and raised it aloft with the point directed toward her heart; but, swift and unexpected as was her action, Talmai was swifter in snatching the weapon from her grasp.

"I am not a Babylonian," she cried, "I am a Jewess."

"A Jewess!" Omar repeated. He would have questioned her, but time was pressing.

"Listen, girl!" he said sternly. "We are not thy pursuers."

She gazed blankly about, her mind yet confused.

"Why art thou pursued? Speak!"

"I am the bondwoman of Harimtu, daughter of the slave-dealer," she began.

"Why didst thou flee?"

"Khar-mes, the high priest, chose me to be a Bride of Bel. This night a priest came to take me to the temple."

She paused and was bidden to continue.

"I am a Jewess. I fled into the street. A friend was to meet me, but it was dark, and I could not find the Avenue of the Temple. I ran about, and those who had been sent for me saw and pursued. Protect me from them, my lord, for thy mercy's sake!"

She trembled and sobbed.

"We have neither part nor lot in this matter, son of Mathan," said Omar bluntly.

"I will not leave the girl to her enemies," replied the young man.

She seized his hand and kissed it.

"It is well," said Omar, inwardly pleased. "We will see what destiny will bring forth. The proverb says that he that passes by and meddles with strife belonging not to him is like unto one that takes a dog by the ears. That which is determined must be done. Will the soldier die?"

"The wound is through the right side. He may live."

"His friends will find him. Thou must disguise thyself, as thine Aramaic attire—even thy horse—would betray thee to the priest."

The young man laid his hand on the mare's neck in protest against separation.

"Have no fear for her safety," Omar hastened to say, knowing the love of the Arameans for their horses. "Exchange, I pray thee, thy outer garments with my servant Jehu."

The transfer of garments was soon made, and Talmai put on the servant's heavy traveller's robe.

"My father," said he, in explanation of his ready obedience, "charged me to trust Omar in all things."

"We are brothers," answered the other. "Jehu, take thou the mare to my house here in Babylon, and guard her as thou wouldst thy life. In the morning come to me at the depot by the Ford of the Rising Sun."

Jehu attempted to mount, but the animal would not permit him until Talmai held her. The faithful creature gazed at her master with something of question and reproach in her large eyes as she submitted to the guiding hand of another. Jehu rode away.

"Now, my children," said Omar, "darkness and distance must be put between us and this place."

He called up the three camels, which knelt. Talmai lifted the girl into one of the saddles. She was afraid, unused to the seat. The touch of the young woman made his nerves tingle, and he looked helplessly at the older man.

"Thou hast never ridden a camel?" Omar asked.

"No," she answered, tremulously.

"Remember, then," continued he, arranging her robe and fastening her feet into the straps, "that upon holding fast depends thy honour and thy life. The camel will follow mine without further guidance. Up!" he commanded, and he steadied her while the tall beast pitched back and forth in regaining its feet.

Talmai mounted, and Omar, after casting an anxious look around, did likewise. He gave the word to his ungainly carrier, and soon the three camels and their strangely met riders were swallowed up in the friendly darkness.

Chapter II

THE FESTIVAL AND THE PROMISE

NEVER within the memory of living man had the celebration of the New Year festival of Zagmuku been so fervent, and the joys of its accompanying "Merrymaking of Merodach" more unalloyed. The return of the divine Istar, with her lover Tammuz, after his dreary imprisonment in the under-world, gave new vitality to the languishing earth, and all animate things throbbed with revirescent ecstacy. Buds and blossoms burst their cerements and filled the land with beauty and fragrance and tenderness. The gods came forth amid clouds of incense, and their tables were heaped with offerings. King Nabopalassar opened his palace and gave gifts. He issued proclamations of immunity, and his subjects went in and saluted him. Like careless children they pelted one another with flowers and abandoned themselves to the enjoyments of the softly whispering groves. Bel, the prince of the gods, descended from his seat in the midst of the temple tower and turned his face to the worshipping votaries upon whom he showered his benefits; and his temple treasuries, even the secret chambers, were running over with tribute. Nor were his favours to be limited. The oracles that raised their cry at dawn announced an era of unprecedented prosperity for the Babylonians. Except on Sabbaths and other holy days, the hum of looms and the cheerful echoes of traffic were heard continuously, and in all broad Kar-Dunyas no man had need to ask for bread.

In this, the nineteenth year of his reign, on the first Nisan, the royal astronomer informed Nabopalassar the king that before day and night again were equal the

only cloud on the national horizon would be dispelled. For two years the Babylonian and Median armies had kept the degenerate lion of the north penned within the walls of Nineveh; and, though the Assyrian power seemed broken, its enemies knew that naught save total extinction could prevent its redintegration. Until Nineveh was laid waste and reduced to mounds and ruins there could be no security for Babylon. Many times in its tempestuous career of conquests and carnage had Assyria neared the verge of destruction, yet always the defeated armies of its adversaries rolled back from the gates of its capital, baffled and dispirited. For six centuries the bloody hand of its rulers rested heavily upon Babylon, and six centuries of humiliation had the Babylonians and their kindred to avenge. Now the gods, through their interpreters the priests, declared the day of retribution nigh. From the ancient shrine of Ea at Eridu came this promise and prediction, in answer to the supplication of Khar-mes the sakkanaku for a spell to bind the king of Assyria:

Anu and Rimmon, the great gods,
Fiercely regard him.
They curse him with a withering curse.
Ere day and night again are equal
They will overthrow his kingdom;
They will remove the foundation-stone of his majesty;
They will annihilate the fruit of his lordship;
They will break his weapons. Lightning
Destructive will smite his land;
Want, hunger, famine,
And corpses will they lay upon his country.
His name and his seed will be rooted out of the land.
But in the presence of his enemies in chains they will not seat him.

Chapter III

THE VIZIER AND NEBUZARADAN

WHEN the god Shamas pushed back the bolts of heaven on the morning of the seventh day of the festival, Babylon still slumbered. The night before witnessed the meal offering of Tasmit and Zarpanit, and the devotees were now exhausted. Not even the market-gardeners clamoured at the city gates, and only birds of the air stirred abroad. It was a perfect spring following the winter's rains. The heavens were drained of moisture, and from that great tower which dominated the city of Bel the eye could sweep over an endless field of green and a fleckless sky of blue. There were cities and villages within range of vision, though they were only indicated where lesser temples lifted their gorgeous truncated tops above the encompassing verdure. The "Golden City" sprawled among her trees and flowers on both sides of the Euphrates. Its two mightiest edifices, Bel's Temple and Nabopalassar's palace, were on the eastern shore and connected by the Avenue of the Temple, a parked boulevard of a mile's length. The seven-storied temple tower was surmounted by a square shrine covered with scales of polished gold. Above the roof of the king's palace protruded tall half-domes plated with burnished copper. These saliencies glittered in the sunshine and were visible from afar off. The royal abode was a vast, irregular structure erected upon the flat top of a rectangular artificial platform or mound of brickwork seventy feet in height and one hundred acres in area. Palace and platform were of brick, but the walls, buttresses, and parapets of the platform glowed with rainbow tints produced by an outer casing of glazed

and enamelled tiles, and by the use of the same glossy material the exterior of the palace was a polychromatic blending of red, yellow, black, blue, and white, harmoniously disposed in bands, panels, and borders, palmettes, chevrons, and lozenges. But the Tower of Bel surpassed the palace in massive splendour.

As the morning wore on, the people began to gather again in the temple groves. Many, especially the strangers attracted by the fame of this equinoctial festival and the visiting inhabitants of the neighbouring cities of Cutha, Sippara, and Niffer, had spent the night there, for the goddess filled all the hours with music and gladness. Her priestesses and daughters of the tents were the choice of Babylon. In honour of the procession of Bel and Beltis, and as a propitiatory offering on his approaching departure for the camp before Nineveh, Prince Nebuchadnezzar had proclaimed from Hit to Eridu, and from Elam to Arabia and Syria, that on the eighth day he would give a midnight feast on the temple grounds. In the night, too, the king was publicly to present his free-will offering to Bel before the star of the Foundation, and to Beltis before the star of the Chariot.

Lulled by the drowsy air, the guards at the royal palace on the great mound were almost in a doze when the sound of approaching voices from the interior caused them hastily to assume the appearance of alertness. The heavy portières separating the inner and outer guard stations were impetuously thrust apart, and a young man, followed by an elder, walked rapidly through the arcade. The first comer's acknowledgment of the soldiers' salute of lowered spears betrayed the military touch, but the elder, energetically using a long staff to keep pace with him, did not notice the act. Both wore that goodly Babylonish garment, a richly embroidered robe. That of the younger was pink in colour and open in front, disclosing an ornately decorated white tunic, laced greaves, and pink sandals of otter-skin. From a cross-belt ornamented with pearls hung a heavily mounted sword which

would require a strong arm to wield effectively. The bearer was stout and vigorous in frame and muscle. Hanging loosely upon his shoulder, where a cord held it in place, was a fleecy white cloak. His head was uncovered, and his thick, dark, well-oiled hair, restrained by a fillet, hung in carefully arranged ringlets to his shoulders, where it was curled and bunched. His crisp beard glistened with perfumed unguents, and a thin black moustache left exposed proud, firmly closed lips. The strong, hooked nose indicated the warrior and accumulator of spoil. His eyes were large, and not set so far apart as those of his companion. Taken altogether, his face was manly, imperious and handsome, but the scowl on it made him look dogged, headstrong, and self-willed.

The robe of the elder man was purple and enveloped him closely. In his belt he carried a light, gold-hilted sword and a dagger. Both wore heavy armlets and bracelets, their sandals sparkled with gems, and seals depended from their chains of gold.

They proceeded to one of several carved stone benches on the open terrace, over which a palace tower cast its shade, and there seated themselves.

"Presume not too much, Nebuzaradan, upon thy kinship with the queen," said the older man. "Little reason has she for loving thy branch of the family, and more than once the king forgave thy father's rebellion."

"Rebellion!" hotly repeated the younger. "Can a descendant of Merodach-Baladan be a rebel in Babylonia?"

"I tell thee, yes!" replied the other, impatiently thumping the tiled pavement with his staff. "Or in Chaldea, if he be Nebuzaradan, son of Dabibi."

"Forgive me, I pray thee, my uncle. Thy words are truth. Though my father was not, yet am I, by every tie of loyalty and gratitude, bound to king Nabopalassar. May his land be green, may he himself be at peace! However, no sin have I committed against the king, yet, when I came hither to ask why I had been taken from

the army before Nineveh and ordered to an obscure post on the Khabour, he turned not his face to me. Let him inquire whether I am a child."

"By the work of his hands and the gifts of his sacrifice the king has arrived at grey hairs and old age, and age is the hardest of masters," responded the other, who was Arrabi, son of Yakin, a kinsman of the queen, and the king's *rabsaki* or vizier. He was also Chief of the Princes, Chief of the Chaldeans, and head of that mighty House of Yakin which in the long-extinct "Dynasty of the Sea Lands" had furnished Babylon with some of her greatest kings. "His throne has become a throne of pain, and Prince Nebuchadnezzar must bow his shoulder to bear the burden."

The scowl on Nebuzaradan's face deepened.

"Two nights ago Nabopalassar led in all the ceremonies of the Descent of Bel. Last night he made his free-will offering before Merodach and Istar, and the lifting up of his hand found favour with the god. At dawn was he in the palace temple with the augurs, and received good omens, whereupon he called a council of the great men, and not until after the ending of the night did he seek his couch. Hadst thou asked a hearing at a propitious hour he would have turned his face to thee."

Nebuzaradan glanced sarcastically at the standard above the tower. "There was a time," he mused aloud, "when the royal emblem hoisted thus above the royal palace meant not alone that within was the king, but that his people, both great and small, might approach and seek of him redress of wrong."

"It was not the king, O Nebuzaradan, that proposed thy removal. Hear thou this, and let my words rest in thy heart. Truly hast thou said that the capture of Nineveh is merely a question of time. Prince Nebuchadnezzar is established in the hearts of the people, yet the king, knowing his Babylonians, fears a revolt when he himself is no more in the land. There are men of power who look upon Nabopalassar as a usurper. They think

of him only as the viceroy appointed by the Assyrian king to govern Babylonia, who seized the throne for himself. That he freed them of the Assyrian yoke they forget. Freedom, peace, and riches have made them stiff-necked and arrogant. Recognize him as Lord of the Horned Crown they will not, even though the queen be a daughter of the house of Bit-Yakin; albeit civil war is less to their liking than Nabopalassar, and since Nebuchadnezzar is a Chaldean and a blackhead of the blackheads, these princes would perhaps grudgingly hail him as king in the royal seat of that other Nebuchadnezzar, he of the Sea Lands and of Merodach-Baladan, our own ancestor. How much more firmly would the son be set upon the throne if he came as the destroyer of Nineveh!"

"I bear him no ill will." Nebuzaradan politely adjusted his cloak to hear more.

"After the fall of Nineveh," continued Arrabi, "he is to be king with his father. Nabopalassar's day for leading in battle is over. Thou, whom he did rear as tenderly as his son, notwithstanding the conspiracies of thy father——"

"My father did that which was right in his generation."

"That time is past. It is not thou who shouldst lay stumbling-blocks in the king's way. Thou, with mine own Musallin, wert raised with the prince, studied from the same books, learned the uses of arms from the same masters, until the king granted thy request for a captaincy, and his favour hath advanced thee to the rank of sultan. His generosity also hath followed thee until now thou art one of the richest noblemen of Babylon, and with thy new appointment go the revenues of Hit and Ardiban."

Arrabi paused to see what effect his words had upon the young general, who was idly fingering a sapphire amulet and gazing vacantly down the Avenue of the Temple. Were it not for the long parallel rows of trees, the umbrageous expanse could have been termed a grove,

as the foliage shaded the paths and roadways the entire distance to the main gate of the Temple grounds. There were clumps of pomegranate ablaze with scarlet blossoms, acacias with heavy lilac spikes, and many other fragrant plants bending under the weight of their fresh and vivid blossoms. Nabopalassar had indulged the curious taste of his people by transplanting foreign trees, which mingled with the familiar cypress, plane, and poplar; but the national palm predominated, and now its feathery crowns were masses of creamy efflorescence whose odour sweetened the air. Doves and pigeons fluttered to and fro, and, as a fitting background to the lovely scene, the varicoloured Tower of Bel rose in diminishing stages of white, orange, blue, red, silver, and gold for three hundred feet above the emerald earth.

There was still an expression of dissatisfaction upon Nebuzaradan's face which Arrabi hastened to dispel.

"Ever has it been thy ambition to hold the post of danger——"

"Which is not at Ardiban," dryly interrupted the soldier.

"Be not so sure. The Pharaoh Necho, after shattering the Jewish forces at Megiddo, and killing Josiah, their king, has subdued in all entirety the lands of Phenicia and Palestine, and now lies at Carchemish, where he is gathering an immense army."

"Ah!"

The vizier smiled.

"Our spies tell us his intent is to cross the upper Euphrates and seize that portion of Assyria which in the division of the empire has fallen to Babylon. Ardiban is the first city he would attack."

"Ah!" repeated Nebuzaradan, his face lighting up.

Arrabi leaned back upon the bench complacently and said:

"What is now needed is not a prince to hammer at the gates of Nineveh, but a general to meet Necho. The king believes thou art the general."

"Then by Nergal!" exclaimed Nebuzaradan, springing up and drawing the cloak tightly across his broad chest, his face shining like a mask of gold, "we are to have fighting!"

"A thorough son of Bel," mused the rabsaki. "Give thee wars, a full harem, stores of wine, priests whose oracles occasionally come true, and thou art content to cease plotting rebellion. Give the men of the land their jars of dates, their skins of palm beer, their festivals, sabbaths, and sacrifices, and they remember they have a king and lord only when his favours diminish."

"So it may be," assented Nebuzaradan, reseating himself, "but why, my lord, was Kistar, son of Sua, removed as governor of the Khabour?"

"From the Assyrians he took bribes to turn from us the kings and tribes of Middle Euphrates. Arameans whom by him we had been taught to believe were coldly disposed would have joined with us had they not been craftily misled by Kistar. At a time when aid was most needed by us, Mathan of the Nabatheans, who, though broken in power, maintains magic influence over all the Arameans, offered service through his son Talmai to Kistar, and the traitor put him off with lies. The Arameans were offended, and their anger smoked. It will be part of thy duty to gain for thy lord the friendship and complete alliance of these princes of the desert and masters of the roads. In the struggle with Egypt they must be on the side of Babylon. So not alone as a watch over against Egypt art thou appointed, son of Dabibi."

"May the king live eternally!" said Nebuzaradan.

Chapter IV

KHAR-MES THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

"WHAT of the prophecy that before the next equinox the Bloody City will fall?" asked Arrabi.

"The most holy oracle has said it," answered Nebuzaradan.

"Thy faith in the gods is staunch?"

The vizier's contempt of priestcraft was notorious, and among the devout he was regarded as a sceptic. The prince was a close follower of the priests.

"I ever walk in the way of the gods," he rejoined.

"Canst thou render a military reason for believing Nineveh will be captured this year?"

"Yes—and no. Within those mighty bulwarks is space where they may plant—every one—his corn in the field, and reap it. Only when the Corn-god fails to give increase could famine dwell in their stomachs. From their battlements the Ninevites hurl defiance. Against their walls the bolts and missiles of our siege-engines are as chaff, and our craft is naught. Were it not for the holy oracle and a certain mine of my own contrivance, I would believe the wall of Nineveh invincible."

"Thy other mines have failed—why not this one?"

The remark irritated the young soldier.

"If I could but run the roaring Tigris under one corner of the wall, there would an opening me made—that is," he added, his irritation increasing with the doubt, "if the river rose above the high-water mark."

"What sayest thou?" sharply asked Arrabi. "By the fifty names of the great gods, thou hast informed Khar-mes the high priest!"

"No," decisively answered the prince. "None save myself and my picked men of Yazan possess the secret. Should the mine fail, the Medes would rejoice; and, to prevent their gaining knowledge of it, I covered its mouth ere leaving for Babylon, and my men of Yazan are here with me."

"From the rising of the sun to its setting there is nothing concealed from Khar-mes or his priests," persisted the vizier with feeling. "In every household and camp are his spies."

Nebuzaradan thoughtfully stroked his chin. "Priests there were, of course, in camp. Could they have known? Even if so, all our other mines were abandoned as failures, and they will conclude that it, too, is now abandoned."

"When didst thou think to make it effectual?"

"When from the melting snows the Tigris swells to its utmost."

"Now do I understand. Not long before thy recall, but before it had been determined to withdraw thee, messengers were hurried by the high priest into the mountains of Guti, even unto the lands of the Upper Sea, to Kirte, Amodi, Van, and Ararat. The deeper the snows in those regions, the higher the spring floods of the Tigris; and it was to measure the snow, and thereby tale the height of the flood waters, that his spies were sent north. Using his knowledge of thy undertaking and of the snowfall be artfully procured from Eridu this prophecy, which must prove false since thou hast forsaken the mine," and Arrabi smiled grimly.

"Thou keepest watch on him, even as he does upon thee."

"We hate, as vizier and high priest are wont to hate. If he meddled not in affairs of state——. But that is an old grievance."

Nebuzaradan was not pleased with his own loquaciousness.

"On this matter, brother of my father," said he, "I beseech thy silence. Without my assistance must Prince Nebuchadnezzar gain the renown of conquering the last city of the Assyrians. If he succeeds not, a way will I show him later."

"Thou art envious of the Prince, Nebuzaradan. Beware of betraying it."

"Let him get mines of his own making. I ask thee, for the present, to keep this matter secret."

Arrabi shrugged his shoulders. "Thy stiffnecked spirit may prove thy ruin. Nevertheless, so shall it be, unless——"

What reservation the vizier had in his mind was not divulged, for their conversation was interrupted by a commotion among the soldiers at the gate of the palace, who hastily drew up to salute some person coming from the interior.

"Khar-mes!" ejaculated the noblemen, as the individual foremost in their thoughts emerged from the palace. Dark and lean, his Chaldean origin was more marked than in either Arrabi or his kinsman, whose ancestors had intermingled for centuries with the aristocracy of Babylon: the high priest came direct from the common people of the bitter and hasty Chaldeans. His garments were an emblazoned and fringed fawn-skin robe in which golden threads sparkled like running fire in stubble. From his still more gorgeously embroidered double-peaked mitre dangled seven different-coloured ribands. Around his waist was a corded girdle ending in front in a broad pendant band in which gems were so encrusted that a shimmering play of light from the jewels accompanied every movement of the knees. The symbols emblazoned and embroidered upon robe, mitre, and cestus were stars, crescents, lozenges, altars, and the mystic tree of life. Behind him walked two priestly attendants hardly less magnificently attired.

The bright sunlight blurred the priest's eyes, and he

raised a heavily jewelled hand to shield them. His hawk-like vision, however, immediately recognised the figures on the terrace.

"The old bat worships Shamas by the light of Sin," muttered Arrabi. "He it was, then, who was closeted with the king."

The high priest advanced to where they sat. Both arose, and the rabsaki bowed ceremoniously. Nebuzaradan sank on one knee and lifted Khar-mes' hand to his forehead. He then stood in a respectful attitude.

"May Bel and Beltis stretch forth the hand," said Khar-mes, including both his hearers in his benediction. They repeated the good wish. Then he asked abruptly:

"Art thou, son of Dabibi, in command of the city?"

"As sultan only. Direct command is with the governor of the city."

"I choose in this matter to deal with thee, knowing thy devotion to the gods. The stars warn us of danger to Bel of Babylon, and the king has graciously granted my request for a guard at the entrances and tower of the Temple of Bel."

"Point the stars to any particular danger?" asked the vizier, with a barely perceptible touch of irony.

"I know," responded the priest quickly,—his voice changing at once from deliberate gravity to aggressive tensity,—"that thou, son of Yakin, art full as a canker-worm of latter-day heresies, yet is it wise in the king's counsellor to scoff at the gods of the land? We," with a nervous sweep of his hand indicating himself, Nebuzaradan, the priests, and the soldiers beyond, "we, who must upon other than our own intelligence depend, will continue in the beliefs of our fathers."

The nobleman did not answer, and the priest turned again to Nebuzaradan: "To E-Sagil did the warning point, even to the temple in which the lord of Babylon has his seat of rejoicing. Further our astronomers have not read, but swift messengers have been despatched to

the houses for gazing at Niffer, Sippara, Erech, and Eridu to compare observations."

"They will return after the hours of danger are past," interjected the vizier.

"The more reason for a guard," replied the priest. "Thou"—addressing Nebuzaradan—"wilt receive a duly signed order from the king's scribe."

"Be it according to thy word," said the officer, who took no interest whatever in the theological passage at arms. "What thou givest me to do will I perform."

The high priest smiled benignantly upon the young soldier, whose unquestioning devotion to the gods and costly gift of daily sacrifice were known to him. Bowing to Prince Arrabi, he turned and descended the stairs to the avenue.

"A wonderful priest," commented the vizier. "The finest issue of the Borsippa College of Priests. Like ourselves, a Chaldean. Babylonians make but poor interpreters of the gods, whom I in my way worship notwithstanding the mock of Khar-mes. Were it not for this man's pride of power, Babylon never would require the walls Nabopalassar is erecting. His determination to gather the nation to worship in one city, and thereby increase the revenues of E-Sagil, makes enemies of Sippara, Accad, Niffer, Garrodilani, Eridu, Cutha, and even Borsippa—neighbours whose friendship we most need. It is such as he, and not a few harmless theorists on the nature of the gods, who compel us to prepare defenses against foes of the state. Beware of him, Nebuzaradan. He directs his mouth, but his heart is unfaithful."

The allusion to the city walls aroused the curiosity of Nebuzaradan about the events that had transpired during his long absence.

"While princes and priests heap up troubles, we soldiers must fight a way through them," said he. "How goes the work on the city walls?"

"Slowly. The king is a master builder, and well are

his foundations laid. The queen and prince are apt pupils. Plans have they devised to make Babylon the strongest-fenced and most beautiful city in the world, but the scarceness of slaves hinders. Of the Assyrian captives, so many have paid their ransom, or been released through bribery and influence that, unless Nineveh soon falls, there must be new campaigns for more slaves."

"They talk in our camp of a palace which Prince Nebuchadnezzar is having built for his Mede bride, and marvellous things are said of it. The Hanging Garden is it named."

"It will surpass the dreams of dreamers. The heart of the princess yearns for her native hills. Our level land is to her like an oft-told tale, which, however beautiful, at last is wearisome. In tenderness of love Nebuchadnezzar would bring the mountains to her."

"Ah—a garden with artificial hills. There is such a spot in the old royal preserves near Nineveh."

"Nay, nay, Nebuzaradan, confuse not great things with small. In fancy transplant thyself to the rocky fastness of the Medes in the Zagros, when it is early summer. The Sun-god is eager, and thou toilest up a dusty road, hoping for rest and shade. On a sudden there lies before thee a pleasant valley in which rises a mountain whose slopes are covered by trees, brushwood, and wild flowers. Far up, on the edge of a tall cliff, thou perceivest a shining palace, and from underneath sheltering boughs peep pink and white cottages. Thou hastest across the valley, through a green field and by the shore of a placid lake, to the foot of the mountain. No longer art thou weary. Thou hearest the plash of falling waters, and above thee on the hillside a mavis lifts its glorious voice, and the grey partridge calls to its mate. Thy path is upward, under the lofty canopy of the oak, the wild almond, the chestnut, and the beech, or over a carpet of tender grasses spangled with roses, jasmines, and sweetbriers. In a sheltered nook thou liest down, and a cool breeze fans thee to slumber."

Nebuzaradan drew his breath. For the dweller on the hot plains of Babylon Arrabi had described a paradise.

"And all for a woman?"

"Yes, the prince is infatuated with the fair Mede. And"—with a slight shrug—"the people crave new things and royal display, and the poets and romancers are supplied with a new theme."

Nebuzaradan laughed pleasantly. "My royal cousin will I aid," said he, "by sending him booty of captured cities and trains of slaves."

"Thou wert ever his favourite, because thou didst force him to the trial in contests of skill and practice of arms instead of yielding to him as did other princes.

"And a worthy rival he was," generously added Nebuzaradan. "But the afternoon wanes. My chariot is in the Eastern court, and there awaits me an Ephesian whom I wish to bring under the favourable notice of the king."

"A refugee?"

"He came to my camp before Nineveh and proved himself an able soldier, well versed in siege tactics. There is blood-guilt on his hands. I shall ask the king to purge him according to established rites."

"I will obtain for thee an audience to-morrow. My chariot is also in the court."

Chapter V

THE STORY OF CLEON

NEBUZARADAN made the Ephesian captain known to Arrabi, and then the two soldiers mounted into the Babylonian's high ivory trimmed chariot. The superb white horses bounded forward the instant they felt the reins tighten, causing a score of tiny bells attached to their harness to break forth in silvery tintinnabulation. There was a brave array of trappings of gold, of metallic rosettes, mother-of-pearl studs, coloured tassels, and scarlet plumes.

"By Dionysus!" exclaimed the Ephesian, as they rode swiftly out of the court and across the open terrace. "No nobler pair have I seen in Lydia or Ionia."

The men, as soldiers and lovers of the horse, scrutinised every point of the faultless animals moving gracefully down the inclined plane from the palace platform to the broad avenue below. Like the stairs for pedestrians, these sloping approaches were invariably built along the side of the mound, instead of projecting at right angles to it. Sculptured alabaster slabs lined the cases, and at intervals bronze masts held aloft iron baskets for torches.

"No purer breed of chariot horses exists," said the Chaldean, "being of direct descent from those horses of Namar that 500 years ago were set aside by the first Nebuchadnezzar as a royal stud. They have not the speed nor fine mould of the horses of Araby, but in strength, agility, and intelligence, made perfect by hundreds of years of training by the royal master of the horse, they excel all horses prepared to do battle. From the Babylonians this strain passed to the Assyrians and now back to the Babylonians."

The chariot rolled rapidly along an alley of the avenue and turned eastward toward Nebuzaradan's palace in E-ki quarter, the aristocratic section of the Golden City—a suburb, it seemed to the Ephesian, familiar with the compactly built cities of the Ægean coast. After Sennacherib destroyed Babylon Esarhaddon his son and successor set about rebuilding it, and his general scheme of reconstruction provided for streets of generous width, abundantly shaded by spreading trees, and lined with streams of water, and in the fifty years that had elapsed the plan was grandly fulfilled. Thick walls encompassed some of the houses, while from others, set in handsome grounds, gayly striped awnings and bright coloured rugs and curtains of blue, of purple and scarlet and fine twined linen, flared bravely at narrow windows and latticed balconies. Gushing fountains whipped the stagnant breeze, and the spring air was laden with the perfume of flowers. Quiet was it here, but in Su-anu, the quarter of the temple, shops that catered to the religious wants of the city of multitudes buzzed with business, and in the mercantile section there never was a hush in the activities of trade.

Babylon at this time had two city walls and a third in process of construction. The first, the inner wall, enclosed the Temple of Bel, the king's palace, and the residences of the nobility, all on the east bank of the river, and in the old sacred city. The second wall, called Imgur-Bel, surrounded the first, and, across the river stretched forth to include such nearby suburbs as Hillat. It was 100 feet high and 100 feet thick. The third wall, called Nimitti-Bel, was to surround Imgur-Bel, be greater in height and thickness, and have a circumference of forty miles. When completed it would enclose a large area of garden and field land from which sufficient corn and vegetables to support the inhabitants of the city could be raised in the event of a protracted siege.

South of the old walled city, within Imgur-Bel, was Hillat, "the profane city," the foreign quarter, a micro-

cosm of nations, the asylum of refugees from other countries. Another quarter of the Imperial city was Hindiyeh, and south of Hindiyeh, and fifteen miles southwest of the temple of Bel, lay the important city of Borsippa, noted for its temple of Nebo, E-Zida, "Tower of Bel," in which the sons of men under the leadership of Etana attempted to scale the heavens. At Borsippa were great linen factories and factories for carpets, robes, and tapestries. What gave the city fame abroad was its colleges, to which flocked students from all the world, for there astronomy, medicine, and mathematics reached their highest developments.

The Chaldean prince informed the Ephesian that a guard was required at the temple that night, and for prudential reasons he preferred stationing his Chaldean company there. Cleon, as a mark of favour, should have command.

"For thy confidence I thank thee," said the Ephesian impulsively. "Ever since I appeared at thy tent as a suppliant have I been loaded with favours, yet concerning my flight from Ephesus not once questioned. Albeit, as thou hast deigned to become my sponsor before thy great king, I must tell thee why I am here."

"I will listen attentively."

"My father," began Cleon, "was an exiled Athenian nobleman who with his family fled to Ephesus, a city founded by Athenians. There was I born, and since I could bear arms I have been a soldier. At no great distance from Ephesus is Miletus, and of all the families of Miletus there is none an Ephesian should feel more hatred for than that of Adrastus. Yet when I, Cleon, son of Teleclus, saw Prisca, daughter of Adrastus, I determined to have no other woman for wife. She loved me, and her father in haste plighted her to another, a kinsman, and set about preparing for the wedding. Prisca sent a messenger to me at Ephesus. Does such a simple affair interest thee, my general?"

"In truth, yes. Thy tale reminds me of the songs

and romances of our Babylonian poets and story tellers. Continue, I pray thee."

"Prisca's message informed me of her distress and suggested that the coming Apaturian festival at Mycale, which every Milesian woman must attend before marriage, might afford us a meeting. The temple grounds on such occasions are thronged by worshippers from all the cities of the Panionic confederation, except Ephesus and Colophon, but, for some treachery of the ancient days, it is death for any Ephesian or Colophonian to enter the sacred preserves of our great god Poseidon at Mycale.

"The messenger employed by Prisca was a Phokean peddler, who betrayed our plans to her kinsmen. Woe to him!

"I hired a galley at Clazomene and, in company with others bound for the sacred groves, reached Mt. Mycale in due time for the festival. The Phokean soon found me. That very evening, said he, the virgins were to go in procession and crown the god, and, as I knew not the grounds, he would guide me to a secluded spot and there fetch Prisca. Guide me he did, and left me, whereupon three men fell upon me with drawn swords, loudly denouncing me an Ephesian.

"Well for me they were not skilled in the rough work of soldiers. Before their shouts could bring assistance I stretched out the three. Realising that I had been betrayed, I fled to my galley and escaped to Ephesus. There I procured money and secretly took passage on a merchant vessel bound for Rhodes. On the third day after arriving at Rhodes I heard myself proclaimed a profaner of the temple of Poseidon, whose life was forfeit. At the same time I learned that two of my assailants in the grove had died, one being Prisca's suitor."

Cleon ceased speaking as the horses turned into a gateway, and the chariot rattled noisily over the huge slabs at the entrance to the palace grounds of Prince Nebuzaradan. There was a charming vista of trees and flowering shrubs, terminated by several large, substantial houses.

Nebuzaradan drew rein in front of the largest building and an exquisitely garbed young man, accompanied by a scribe, carrying a roll of papyrus, hastened forward to greet the prince, who, with his guest, entered the house.

"This, Cleon," said Nebuzaradan, "is Iba, son of Idina, my secretary, who will go with thee to the temple. The horses and chariot which brought us hither use until thy establishment is complete. Make an order, Iba, for a company of my Yapulla guard under Cleon to go on duty at the Tower of Bel, and do thou learn from Khar-mes where he would station the guards."

Iba and the scribe left, and the two soldiers proceeded into a large, luxuriously appointed open court partly shaded by fancifully designed curtains of blue, of purple, and white, extending from the sides to bronze standards fixed in the tessellated pavement. A high latticed balcony at the further end of the court was for the use of the women of the harem, where they could sit unseen and view all that passed below. The court was plentifully furnished out with couches of rare woods framed with ivory, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and covered by costly furs, rugs of dyed wood, and cloth of gold. Ivory and teak stands supported vases containing the blossoms of spring, and chairs, stools, and other furniture were carelessly scattered about. Fruit was placed on small tables, and slaves handed them spiced pomegranate wine. One youth burnt incense in a silver censer, and another frequently sprinkled them with rosewater. Girls stationed themselves by the sides of the prince and his guest, and every time they either ate or drank held under the lips a gold embroidered napkin. Eunuchs slowly swung fans of ostrich plumes to drive away the flies.

Observing the Ephesian's flattering admiration, the prince explained that this main building constituted the public offices and reception hall of his town residence. Connected with it by a long passage beyond the latticed balcony was his harem. Within the men's quarters were living rooms for his horde of servants and slaves, accom-

modations for his bodyguard, large stables, an immense granary, and several warehouses. It was the care of men of his rank that their palaces contained in reserve sufficient food to supply themselves, their numerous dependents, and, possibly, poorer neighbours for a long period, in case of a siege. Carelessness in maintaining such a reserve hastened the downfall of the city when Sennacherib, the Assyrian, invested it. Then the ancient and almost forgotten resort of human sacrifice was temporarily restored, and children were slain to pacify the angry gods, who answered not. Before the city succumbed the dead were heaped up in the streets, and the living were black like an oven from hunger.

Nebuzaradan expressed his wish to hear the outcome of the Ephesian's adventure. "Thou wert at Rhodes," he said, "a refugee, and hadst just heard how the encounter in the sacred groves ended."

Thus encouraged Cleon continued:

"A reward was offered for my capture, and Rhodes, being an Ionian city, was now a perilous city of refuge. In pretence of being a merchant, I bought a cargo of olives, and in my dealing—though I knew naught of the ways of traffic—word came that the Xanthean olive crop had been destroyed by the Lykians. It was a chance not to be despised, and, loading my olives on a small vessel, I sailed for the port of Patara, in Lykia of the Dorians. But Hermes, our Grecian god who protects merchants, angry at my deception, raised a great storm of wind which drove the ship on the coast of Lykia, and all I had was lost in the wreck. We struck inland and came to Xanthus, where I found friends who supplied me with means to reach Sardis, the city of King Alyattes of Lydia. Most graciously did the king receive me, and I despatched a messenger to Prisca with words of love and good cheer. I also sent to Ephesus for wherewithal to establish myself properly at the Lydian court.

"The star of my god still withheld its light. Before relief or message arrived the king informed me that Mycale

had demanded my surrender to its temple priesthood. Alyattes was in a strait betwixt two courses. On his last yearly raid into Miletus he had destroyed by fire the temple of the Assessian Minerva; now his own territory was threatened by a host of Cimmerians, and he was seeking to make a league with the Ionian cities on the pretext that they, more than Lydia, were in danger from the barbarians. In expiation of his impiety he had promised to dedicate to Minerva two new temples, the magnificence of each to exceed the one destroyed. He also engaged to drive the Cimmerians back through the gates of the Caucasus, if while doing so his own territory was not invaded from Ionia."

"How did thy enemies so soon learn of thy presence at Sardis?"

"At Miletus," continued Cleon, "is a famous temple to the Didymean Apollo, our Grecian sun-god, who is like your Shamas. In the ancient times, before the Ionians seized that territory, the temple was dedicated to the service of the Lydian god Sandon, and the members of a priestly family known among Ionians as the Branchidæ were its attendants. This family is still dominant and with the Lydian priesthood and the temples of Ionia maintains close relationship. Hence my presence in Sardis soon became known.

"To acquit Alyattes, I offered to surrender to Mycale. 'Nay,' said the king, 'my hospitality thou must not shame. Here thou canst not remain, but there is none to stay thy flight. Of a truth,' he added with mock severity, 'as I have not yet purged thee of thy blood guilt, thy right to refuge is overpast.' A generous order on his treasurer he gave me, and once more was I a wanderer. The siege of Nineveh is in all mouths, and I turned my horse's head this way. It is a long journey and full of dangers, but king Alyattes' letters carried me safely until I left Sinjar. Near there I was captured by an Aramean band of the tribe Sukhi and taken to their city on the Khabour. I was detained more as a slave than as a warrior captive

and learned their tongue and much of the Babylonian language. My escape was due to the friendly services of a Babylonian captive called Ina, a former slave dealer. He might have escaped with me, but having become an eunuch in captivity and therefore barred from the temples of his gods, he would not face the scorn of his former associates."

"I think I know him," said Nebuzaradan.

"On foot I travelled across upper Assyria to thy tent, my lord, and here am I, thy devoted retainer."

"Thy statement contents me," said Nebuzaradan.

After more talk on this subject, and directions about guarding the temple, the Babylonian summoned Iba. The secretary was ready, and in a few minutes the chariot whirled out of the gateway into the street, with the reins in Cleon's hands.

Chapter VI

THE LADY HARIMTU AND HER STEWARD

ABOUT the midhour of the same afternoon the Lady Harimtu, daughter of Ina the lost slave dealer, lying motionless like a voluptuous rose on her perfumed couch, opened her eyes, and dreamily contemplated the enamelled brick walls of her chamber, with their lively paintings, and the cedar ceiling whose fragrance breathed upon her heart. From without came the lulling sound of faintly splashing water, and the caressing air that drifted in did not disturb the filmy curtains at the doors and over the small grated windows of the chamber beyond. With a sigh of content she again closed her eyes and slept. Outside a maid servant watched the shadows grow.

There was a profusion of strong colours in the chamber, with lilac and white as the persistent ornamentation. Lilac and white appeared in the curtains as a wide band, in the corner pieces as the tracery of sacred trees and on the walls above the frieze as a circumscribing fringe of rosettes. Intervening tints of pink and gray diffused a peculiarly restful tone over the vermillion and gold of the coffered ceiling. The frieze in both rooms was a continued line of paintings on stucco, representing a procession at the festival of Istar in Ad, the month of Fire, when the Queen of the Bow was specially worshipped as the goddess of war and the chase. Beneath the fringe of rosettes a broad diaper of gray glazed tiles and rose coloured tulips gave a lighter tone to the wall, the base of which was black marble. The whole effect of this vigorous polychromy was heightened by the ivory, gold,

glass, and bronze articles of vertu and the tiled floor, with its rugs of gayest Borsippa. The glory of the apartment, however, was not in the embayed ceiling, the show of precious ware, or the mural colour scheme, but a series of upright wall panels, in which the adventures of Istar the goddess of love appeared vividly portrayed in low relief. The ground was yellow, the sky blue, the trees green, and the costumes were painted to harmonize. The story depicted was the rejection of the love of the Queen of Heaven by Gilgames the epic-hero, and his recital of the fate of her mortal lovers. The panels were in pairs, one representing the wooing, the other the penalty. In the first, Alala, the eagle, soared above Istar's head while she made a snare for him; in the companion panel, he beat his clipped wings against the ground in a vain endeavour to fly. In the second, she half reclined upon a lion's back, with her arms about his neck; in the sequel he cowered at her feet. Then came a noble horse rejoicing in his strength and, later, cast low in abasement. The shepherd Tabula, changed by her sorcery into a hyena, came next. The two last panels represented, in the one, Istar in Hades on her quest for the god Tammuz and, in the other, Istar and Tammuz embracing upon their reunion.

The warning cacophone of a peacock broke in upon the slumber of the mistress of these luxuries, and, hastily arising, she clapped her hands. The waiting woman answered the summons. A superb specimen of young womanhood, this slave, bare to the waist, from which fell a muslin skirt of florid design. On her waist and arms were gold circlets, on her ankles tinkling little bells, around her neck a string of stone cylinders and agate beads fastened by a scorpion of lapis lazuli.

"It is past time to awaken me, Gaga," said Harimtu sharply.

"It lacks a kasbu of sunset," answered the slave, pointing to a clepsydra, "and my mistress needed rest. All has been made ready by Barak."

"The banquet hall sprayed with perfume, the wine cooled? Send Barak here."

Gaga disappeared, and presently Barak entered, a dark-visaged man in whose beard gray hairs had begun to appear. He assured his mistress that the arrangements were perfected for her Zagmuku banquet.

In the pleasure-loving city there was no one who had more thoroughly mastered the art of ministering to the jaded appetites of the rich and idle than the daughter of the slave dealer. Although nearing middle age, she had preserved much of her beauty, and the expert use of a toilet case supplied any deficience in looks. Harimtu was the minister, not the sport, of pleasure, ever since her father wandered into Syria in search of slaves and returned no more to his home.

When satisfied that the preparations in hand were properly under way, the lady Harimtu made inquiry of her steward if the gods had been propitiated. To the shrine of Bel and Beltis he had sent an ox whole, roasted; to Merodach and Zarpanit the same; to Adar and Gula, a meal offering; to Nebo and Tasmit, a sheep; for every shrine in the great precinct of the temple something, with a tablet containing a prayer and the name of the offerer.

Confident of the blessing of the gods on her banquet, the lady Harimtu listened to each detail, as recited by the steward, and added or set aside with unerring judgment. There was ample provision of the choicest lambs out of the flock and tenderest calves out of the stall, much hare, partridge, bustard, poultry, fish, pastry, cheese, butter, honey, milk, dates, sweetmeats, dried locusts, and abundance of corn, to be accompanied with sweet and spiced drinks, and the white wine of Caucasus, and the red wine of Helbon. There were the peaches of Persia, the citrons of Medea, the figs of Hyrcania, the grapes of Carmania, the plums of Damascus, the cherries of Pontus, the apples of Armenia, the olives of Palestine, the mulberries of Egypt—not all from their native soils,

for many were acclimated and produced in the home orchards.

To the music she turned her attention. There must be music for the diners, music for the singers, music for the mummers, music for the dancers, and music for an open air play pertinent to the season. The instruments were the dulcimer, cornet, harp, lyre, double pipe, tambour, hand drum, cymbals, tambourine, and trumpet. As the band was to be stationed in the garden fronting the wide, open folding doors of the banquet hall, certain parts had to be strengthened and others diminished. This Harimtu directed. With the names of the few play-actors necessary for the performance she was familiar. The singers engaged were professional women and boys. A poetic explanation of the play was to be recited by the celebrated poet and story teller, Kak-Merodach. The dancers of her own establishment caused no anxiety, for of their youth, beauty and accomplishments she was well aware. The variety and abandon of these girls was one of the factors of her fame. They came from Egypt, Arabia, Armenia, Lydia, and even from the distant countries of the Indus. Some had been presented to her by men whom she had entertained. Of a present of this character, received the day before from Prince Nebuzaradan, she was less certain. It was four flaxen-haired, blue-eyed young girls captured by Cyaxares the Mede from the Scythians and trained in the Medean court.

An unwelcome train of thought introduced by the consideration of the prince's gift interrupted Harimtu's work. She well knew that, while it purported to be a free offering, it was preliminary to a request for the gem of her household, Shaghulla. She frowned when she recollected that this was the day upon which she must deliver her favourite to the high priest for entrance into the hierodulic house of purification. Not all her service to Khar-mes ensured her this exemption. From her house the secrets of the greatest men of Kar-Dunyas and the vinous revelations of wealthy strangers

went straight to his closet. Khar-mes had merely to order, and she cast her net. When only four years old, Shaghulla was purchased of a wandering tribe by Ina and given to Harimtu. Her education in music, dancing, and the arts of beauty was an agreeable care for her mistress, and she was restricted to the private apartments and gardens of the establishment, a quarter to which no guest was permitted admittance. Once, by a mischance, Nebuzaradan met her, and the evasion that followed his inquiries spurred his desire of possession. His offers to buy her revealed the fact to Harimtu that the beautiful slave who had grown to be her favourite was not an object of barter and sale. She dared not offend Nebuzaradan, and delayed an understanding, feeling relieved when he left on the Assyrian campaign. Later Khar-mes, from whom nothing in her house was hid, informed her that Shaghulla had been divinely chosen for the harem of the god Bel, to which once a year went the most beautiful virgin in Babylon. On every eighth and eleventh day of the festival of Zagmuku the king of the gods of heaven and earth revealed himself in the shrine on the summit of the Tower of Bel, and there, awaiting him, was the woman selected the year before. For this distinction one year of purification was necessary. It was the greatest honour to which a Babylonian woman could aspire. Harimtu had now no anxiety on Nebuzaradan's account. The claim of the high priest was superior.

These thoughts engrossed Harimtu's mind until she remembered the presence of Barak.

"This, my mistress, is the last service as slave I shall render thee. The money for my ransom has been placed in the hand of the judge and the tablet of manumission will be ready to-morrow for thy signature."

"A double loss, Barak. I would thou wert a home-born slave, but, being not so, the law gives thee the right to buy liberty, and the judges have assessed the sum. Thou hast the money, Barak, for thou didst not put

thy wages into a bag with holes. Usury is profitable, and the guests of Harimtu are blind borrowers."

"The privilege of lending was one of the many kindnesses thou didst show to me, my lady."

"So now thou wouldst return to thy home in distant Jerusalem. Why shouldst thou leave thy fatness? I would hold thee here—not as my slave, however."

"For years my hope has been to see once more in the flesh the place where my heart passes its time. Thou never hadst that feeling, and it is my prayer that never shall it come to thee. This day thy father in some distant land may have his face turned toward Babylon."

"True," said Harimtu, sadly. "How happened it that thou didst become a captive?"

"I was not the first of my family to be captive to Babylon. When Esarhaddon the Assyrian who was also king of Babylon conquered Jerusalem he brought with him, as hostages for the tribute and offering imposed upon our holy city, our king Manasseh and many Jewish noblemen. Among them my father. On their return to Jerusalem, my father helped Manasseh to cast out the idols in the house of the Lord our God, and in punishing the priests of the strange gods. When Manasseh was gathered to his fathers of the house of David his son Amon worshipped false gods, and my family fell into disfavour. Our estates were seized, and my father and myself were sold into captivity to the accursed Edomites and bought from them by thy father. My father died on the way hither, and I have been in thy household since. Thy kindness hath ever followed me like a benediction."

"True, Barak," said Harimtu, with something of tenderness in her tone and glance which he noted with apprehension.

"My mistress," continued he hastily, "friends of my father's family in Judea have inclined the heart of king Jehoiakim to me, and there is promise that he will restore my lands. The high priest Hilkiah has also promised."

"I have heard from Khar-mes that by birth and right of wealth thou mayest ask for any nobleman's daughter to wife."

"Of an honest and goodly stock am I, and it is the custom among the sons of the kingdom of David to take wives from among the daughters of the seed of their fathers. Although I was left in captivity, it is not the rule among our people to forsake the unfortunate of our race. There is another follower of the One God here who is likewise subject to ransom, and, with confidence in thy goodness of heart, I make request of thee to consent to an appraisement."

"Of whom speaketh thou?" asked Harimtu, at a loss.

"Shaghulla, my mistress."

"Shaghulla! impossible!"

"I know, my mistress, thou dost reckon her highly and I will not lessen the price."

"But thou knowest not—" Harimtu hesitated.

"I beseech thee to hear me patiently, O my mistress," said Barak finding words at last for that which he had often endeavoured to bring his tongue to say to her. "I know she is a Jewess, though she herself did not know it until I told her. Pardon thy servant I pray thee for keeping this matter silent. She was stolen when a child, too young to remember her parents or people, but from the little she carried in the memory and inquisition of my own I learned her nativity. I have taught her of her people and her God, and she would willingly go back to the land of her birth."

"Thou errest, Barak, thou errest foolishly," said Harimtu with a gesture of impatience. "Khar-mes has read her horoscope and declares her to be of Babylonian birth. If not, what can she be to thee? Dost wish to take her to Jerusalem as servant, concubine, or wife?"

Barak detected danger in his mistress's voice. "As a servant, till she is restored to her people," he answered diplomatically.

"I tell thee, it is impossible."

"But the law—"

"One man there is in Kar-Dunyas who is above the law. He has decreed otherwise."

An expression of alarm on the steward's face showed that he had dropped his mask of calmness. Harimtu, observing this, sent home her last shaft.

"Khar-mes the high priest has chosen her to be a Bride of Bel. At midnight she enters the house of purification."

"God of my fathers!" exclaimed the Jew. And then Harimtu knew it was love, and not compassion, that prompted his generosity. "She must be saved," he continued, speaking to himself.

His mistress laughed derisively. The interview was over.

Chapter VII

THE BRIDE OF BEL

HARIMTU summoned Gaga. All feeling of resentment over the hieratic confiscation of her favourite was gone. She was willing, aye eager, to place the girl in the keeping of Khar-mes. From an adjoining closet the maid dragged forth cedar chests, and soon the floor of the room and the porch outside were littered with raiments of silk and fine linen, tires, and ornaments for the head, the hair, the ears, the neck, the breast, the arms, the waist, the legs, the ankles. Together with these were glass and ivory boxes of paint, powder, unguents, and perfumes, and all weapons of enchantment. Harimtu selected a suit for the evening and set forth into the garden attached to her private apartment. Here were sweet-smelling trees and vine-covered arbours, and all manner of herbs and flowers, and all the chief spices. She strolled through the shaded paths till she came to a fountain in a wide basin of water. Drooping willows and evergreen bays enclosed and shaded the spot, and hither serving maids brought rugs and cushions for the benches, and couches of white pula stone.

"Shaghulla will I have attend me," she said, and the maids left her.

Presently the young woman appeared at the portal of a trellised footpath, where she stopped, hesitating to intrude unbidden upon her mistress's thoughts. Her outer robe was of diaphanous gray muslin, beneath which showed a crimson skirt of filmy silk cinctured with a cord. As she rested the tips of her fingers on the trellis the loose sleeve fell away from an arm of exquisite

"THOU ART SUFFICIENTLY BEAUTIFUL FOR BOTH BEL AND KHARMES."—*Page 41.*

mold. A stray shaft of sunshine on her filleted head revealed a lurking shade of newly melted copper in her silky hair and tinted with ruby the depths of her lustrous eyes. The birds in the trees ceased their chatter, as if in hushed admiration of her vernal beauty. The silence aroused Harimtu from a revery. She glanced coldly at the expectant girl, but the innate kindness of her heart asserted itself.

"Thou art sufficiently beautiful for both Bel and Kharmes," she remarked sardonically.

The girl advanced with a confiding smile. This woman had been almost a mother to her. To wait upon her was a delight. Choosing a thick, heavy rug, she spread it from the bench to the edge of the pool. Then she unloosened, one by one, her garments and her jewels.

Dropping the last loose robe from her shoulders Harimtu stepped daintily into the basin.

Bathed, refreshed with powdered pumice, and rejoiced with perfumed ointment, Harimtu resumed her seat on the cushioned bench and, looking-glass in hand, critically watched the process of beautification. Soon, under the deft hand of the maiden, the cheeks had taken on a rosier hue, the eyebrows a darker shade, and a languorous look was imparted to the eyes. The arms, fingers and palms were tinted, the nails dyed and polished, and the veins of the feet and ankles faintly outlined in blue. The dark hair was glossed with sweet oil, curled in part, and bound by a golden fillet from which hung on the forehead a sparkling crystal amulet. Then, clothed and decked, she remembered that she had another obligation to fulfil.

"Since thou wert a little girl," she began, "thou didst never disobey. Yet I learn that thou hast kept a secret from me."

The girl flushed. "To-morrow—it was in my heart to speak—to-morrow, when Barak petitions for my freedom," she stammered.

"Art thou so eager to leave me?"

"No, oh no," cried the girl. "If always as now I might be with thee! It is the future I dread."

"The future!" impatiently rejoined her mistress. "Thou and the future! What conceit has Barak put in that pretty head? If the goddess Istar has filled thy hand with favours it was not that thou mightst think, my pearl, but that thou mightst approach the seat of her divinity with supplication, humility and bowing of the face, that thou mightst be to thy lord and master as cool waters to the thirsty traveller. The goddess Mamit has fixed one destiny for beautiful women. Thou art but a cup which is full of sweet drink. Be not deceived by this wily Judean. Tell me, dost love him?"

"No," weighing the answer.

"I understand thee not. Why dreadest thou the years to come? If during my lifetime I sold thee it would be to a princely master. Long ago I made provision for thy freedom, shouldst thou be here when I am gone to the land of darkness. What has this meddling Jew promised thee?"

The look of distress on the girl's face disappeared. The direct question helped to frame the thoughts which Barak's subtle teachings had implanted. Training inclined her to the life Harimtu suggested; instinct repelled it.

"To find my father, if he is living, and, if he is dead, to restore me to my people. I am a Jewess."

"No Jewess art thou," said Harimtu, incomprehensive and impatient. She felt that she was wasting words on an ingrate. "The high priest declares thee to be a native Babylonian."

"The high priest! Khar-mes? How has thy servan obtained favour in his eyes?"

"Thou hast been chosen as the next Bride of Bel, an honour thou dost not deserve."

"An honour," murmured the girl dully.

Harimtu, taking a final survey of the handiwork revealed by her looking-glass, did not respond. The

struggle in the girl's breast was short, tense, and decisive.

"Surely thou wilt not permit it!" she cried, dropping to the ground before her astonished mistress, and embracing her knees. "Oh, my mistress, before thee I bow myself. Turn not from me thy face! Lift up my countenance!"

The girl wept and clung to Harimtu, whose surprise was greater than her indignation. For herself, if she were to be attached to the service of the temple, she would prefer the groves and the freedom of the daughters of the tents, but the reluctance of this mere child to the high honours of the inner circle was mystifying.

"Cease," she said, loosening the girl's hands. "We belong to the gods, and a Babylonian woman is ever proud to yield herself at their command. No one may refuse to the gods the one gift her beauty entails, and does not every daughter of Babylon joyously perform the pious duty of the Temple of Union?"

"I am no daughter of Babylon," sobbed the girl. "I am a Jewess. Barak knows my people."

Harimtu hardened her heart.

"Barak does ill to cross Khar-mes. Better for him that he descend into the pit of lions. The double cord of justice would be a merciful ending to his dream of home. At midnight thou enterest the house of purification. A priest will come for thee. Leave me and send Gaga."

The young girl slowly arose. She looked into the eyes of the calm woman and knew that further beseeching was useless. Despair clutched her heart, but she clenched her hands, and departed reluctantly, hoping to be called back.

For a second Harimtu felt remorseful. The arrival of Gaga, however, gave something else to think about.

On the way to her room the maiden came upon Barak, who read in her countenance what she had to say.

"Thou wilt not become a Bride of Bel?" he asked eagerly.

"Death will be more welcome."

"Praise be to the God of the Jews!" fervently ejaculated the steward. "There is hope. What is the hour set for thy departure?"

"At some time before midnight, unless thy God doth save me."

"He will," said the Jew, though in his heart he had doubt, as he considered the power of the high priest and the thousands of arms stretching to every part of the world. He surmised that Khar-mes intended the young woman for himself, and as he was firmly convinced of her Jewish origin, Barak could not understand why the priest should select her as the Bride of Bel, who must be a native Babylonian. He mentally acquitted Khar-mes of the impiety of attempting a deliberate fraud upon Bel. The Jew had been taught the religion of Moses by vagabond rabbin, and at heart, though he did not realise the apostasy, he was not far from being a Babylonian. He could easily believe that Khar-mes would take advantage of a sophistry, yet this great prince of the church would surely shrink from exposing the holy sanctuary to the chance of defilement, he mused. Would he refuse a favour asked by the Egibi, that great house which controlled the trade and revenue of the city of merchants? An Egibi should be willing to warn Khar-mes that the chosen Bride was ineligible by birth. But the horoscope! Barak was puzzled. The stars would not deceive. A brilliant idea flashed into his mind. He thought he saw a means of playing the Egibi against the high priest.

The girl watched his face, fearing to speak.

"The high priest could not dare have it known that he had chosen a foreign born woman as a Bride of Bel," he added aloud. "Trust me," patting her cold hand between his palms. "I will save thee."

The expedient his quick mind had originated was assuming shape.

Even in her terror, the girl withdrew her hand.

"Kabtiya of the Egibi must be seen without delay. To his palace will I proceed with speed and lay the matter before him. Albeit not of our faith, the Egibi have Jewish blood in their veins, and never has a Jew been turned from their door. Go to thy room and, if called, make excuse to delay."

Barak started away at a rapid pace, but turned and rejoined Shaghulla.

"The priest may come for thee in my absence," he explained, "and it is well to be prepared. Pasiya the gate-keeper thinks and acts as I command, and him will I direct to inform thee and detain the priest whilst thou escape. Kina, the chief eunuch, hungers for my place as steward. Trust him not. Thou knowest how the small gate in the private garden is opened—the gate through which we go to the temple. If the priests come before my return, fly through the gate whilst they are looking for thee in the house."

"Yes," said she eagerly. Then her face clouded. "But where shall I go?"

Barak was disconcerted. "I know not," he acknowledged. "Hillat, the home of foreigners, would be the first quarter searched. The safest place is in the largest crowd. Wear a veil and take thy way to the temple grounds. Mingle with the worshippers and sightseers, and at midnight leave the grounds by the great gate." Barak paused. "Walk down the third alley of the Avenue of the Temple as far as the king's palace, if necessary. By that time I will be able to desert the revelers at the feast and join thee."

"I will obey thee."

"Remember," concluded Barak impressively, "when the door of the temple closes behind thee there is no escape."

He looked keenly at the girl and rested his hand on the handle of a dagger in the girdle of his long robe. She understood and impetuously held out her hand. Barak gave her the weapon.

"May the Lord be unto thee a wall of fire," said he, and departed.

Chapter VIII

THE TEMPLE OF BEL AND THE PROCESSION OF THE GODS

AS the chariot containing Iba and Cleon approached the Tower of Bel the vastness and prismatic splendour of the pyramidal pile grew upon the Ionian. Having arrived in Babylon only the night before, it was his first near view of the holy mountain, the rumour of which was spread through all the world. The rainbow brilliancy and stupendous bulk of the huge edifice first impressed him. The gracefulness of the temples of his own country was here lacking, but the magnificent massiveness of E-Sagil awed the susceptible Cleon. Mounting skyward in diminishing proportion, this colossal structure of brick cleaved the air to the height of three hundred feet in seven different-coloured layers. The enormous cube that formed its first stage or base was three hundred feet square and one hundred and ten feet high. It was cased with bitumen-blackened brick, and fitly dedicated to Ninib the strong. The next mound was white, the third orange, the fourth blue, the fifth red, the sixth silver, and the seventh gold.

The second stage was two hundred and sixty feet square, sixty feet high, and the only one of the seven with sloping sides. Its colour was white, in honour of Istar, the queen of love and mistress of battle, the white lady, the mistress of the sky and the princess of heaven and earth.

The third mound commenced a series of stages of equal height. It was two hundred feet square and twenty feet high, the colour orange or sandal. It bore the name of Merodach, the messenger of the great gods.

The fourth stage was one hundred and seventy feet square and twenty feet high. Blue was it, for Nebo, the lord of Borsippa, the possessor of the reed of augury, the fructifier of the corn, and the master of learning.

The fifth stage was one hundred and forty feet square and twenty feet high. It was blood red, for Nergal the king of battles, lord of Cutha, and warrior of the great city of hell.

The sixth stage was one hundred and ten feet square and twenty feet high. Its sides were covered with thin plates of burnished silver in honour of Sin the wise, lord of the white image and god of the moon.

Topping all was the golden seventh stage, the Upper Temple, the peculiar sanctuary of Bel as the god of the sun, prince of Babylon, and lord of the world. Eighty feet long and seventy feet broad, and fifty feet high, its sides were covered with thin scales of gold. Here occurred the daily ceremony of greeting the dawn.

The sides of each stage faced the cardinal points, while in all other mansions of the great gods in both Assyria and Babylonia, except Bit-Zida at Kalah, the corners faced the cardinal points.

The chariot wheeled into the Avenue of the Temple, and the reflection of the declining sun's rays, from an edge of the upper story, flashed into Cleon's eyes and dazzled him.

"Give me the reins, that the full majesty of the mansion of the great god may rejoice thee," said the accommodating Iba.

"It shines like gold," exclaimed the Ephesian, rubbing his eyes.

"Gold it is, and the story beneath is cased with silver from Assyrian temples. Prince Nebuchadnezzar has taken a vow to make brilliant the interior of the shrines of E-Sagil with captured gold and sculptured stones of Nineveh."

A lurch of the horses interrupted the conversation. They had nearly run down a pedestrian in the garb of

a bondsman. The Avenue was beginning to brighten with people in festal clothing, but the luxuriant foliage had concealed this man from view until he attempted to cross in front of the team.

"Oh, it is thou, Barak?" snapped out Iba.

Barak bowed low with his apologies, and hastened on to escape the whip held threateningly aloft.

"The steward of Harimtu, daughter of the slave dealer, is he," the secretary explained. "Of the banquets and entertainments given in Babylon at this season hers is ever the most sumptuous. She is a woman subtle of heart and answers not our ancient description of a virtuous woman."

"And what is that description?" asked Cleon, at once interested.

"We learn it in our copy-tablets at school. 'What is a virtuous woman?' asks the tablet, and then it tells: 'The woman who, being married, hath caressed no man; who in her husband's absence doth not paint herself; who in her husband's absence taketh not off her clothes; whose veil no man except her husband hath raised; who hath never moistened her lips with an intoxicating liquor.'"

"Those are difficult excellencies."

"It is an ancient model. In these days our women are not so strict."

"I hope not," dryly remarked the Ephesian.

"Thou canst now discern the stairs along the sides of the stages. Half way up is a resting place where one may sit and view the surrounding country. On that landing is another sanctuary of Bel, which none save priests of high degree enter."

Cleon, who had pillaged Lydian temples, inwardly decided that the sanctuary was the secret repository of the gold and precious stones given the gods.

Since they left the house of Nebuzaradan the sun had passed from the heavenly sphere of Bel to the sphere of Ea, and the people in festal mood were now swarming

from every side street into the Avenue which led to the temple. They bore gifts for the gods and were as merry-hearted as children released from the school-room. Those who did not have offerings could procure something acceptable at the booths and bazars at the gate of Zarpanit. Though the majority of worshippers walked, others bestrode horses and mules, or rode in two-wheeled carts and chariots. The vehicles utilised the broader roadways of the umbrated avenue. Some carts had a tall, narrow covering, set upon a frame erected over the wheels and capable of holding two persons seated sidewise. The driver stood in front, and the varied and ornamental designs of the covers, together with the retinue of servants and eunuchs, denoted the occupants' social status. Carts pulled by slaves, a method of progress not without its advantages in such a throng, betokened occupants of high rank. There were open carts bearing garlanded women, and carts drawn by oxen, and chariots drawn by mules. With merry calls and joyous laughter, the women showered flowers upon their friends and acquaintances, or whoever caught their fancy. Many carried branches of palm, or odoriferous plants, and garlands of flowers. In the decoration of the animals there was an extravagant use of rosettes, plumes, and other harness garniture, and a cheerful medley arose from innumerable small bells, which tinkled incessantly. Swarms of vociferous children added variety to the joyous confusion.

Carts of rude manufacture bore coops of pigeons and poultry intended for sale on the temple grounds, and the venders quaintly announced their goods by imitations of the cries of their feathered stock. They were not only challenged by prospective customers, but also by their own fowls, and the long and earnest bargainings were freely participated in by those within hearing, who frankly and impartially chaffed buyer and seller. The presence of garlanded oxen, sheep and goats, led by the donors or by the donor's slaves, marked the prosperous or intensely contrite devotee.

The gifts indicated the agricultural character of the country. Strictly speaking, they were not gifts, they were voluntary restitutions in the shape of tithes. Every product of the earth and all the fruits of men's labour belonged to the gods, and every person in the state, from king to serf, was but a leaseholder entrusted temporarily with the care of the gods' property. The gods graciously received the gifts as tokens of gratitude, yet the offerings in a measure were compulsory as tithes.

This effervescent happiness of a simple-minded people, whose religion fitted their temperament, was familiar to the Ionian, who well knew the groves of Ephesus. But the chromatic splendour of the seven-storied tower, with its suggestions of incalculable riches, fascinated him.

The Babylonians recognised in the Ephesian a foreigner, notwithstanding his Babylonian cloak, and the handsome lighthaired stranger became an object of interest and friendly badinage. A shower of flowers was started by women in carts, and his chariot was soon a common target.

"Visit not the groves, stranger," a young man shouted, laughing.

"Crown thyself, beautiful one," cried a young woman, running alongside and tossing a wreath of wild tulips into the chariot. "Thou art to face the gods."

Cleon smilingly placed the wreath on his head, amid a buzz of admiration. The contagion of merriment affected him.

"Thy air may not be as pure as that of the Ægean," he remarked to Iba, "but like wine, it makes the heart glad."

The women waved their hands, and more wreaths were brought to him by slaves from covered carts. Cleon asked Iba what this attention signified.

"The women are on the way to Bit-Shagatha, the House of Union," replied the secretary.

As Cleon looked none the wiser, he explained:

"Dost not observe that many of them wear crowns and girdles of cords? Once in her life-time every daughter of Babylon must pay tribute of womanhood to Zarpanit, consort of Bel, the lady of the land. Those with the cords take a place in Bit-Shagatha, and may not return to their homes until the cords have been loosened by a stranger; his gift of silver, however small, is sacred and may not be refused nor his advances rejected. A custom it is we have received from our forefathers, though, since Sargon the Assyrian, father of the vile Sennacherib, violated it by exempting damsels of the upper classes, our women of rank and wealth frequently obtain acquittal of the pious obligation by bribing the attendant priests. These gifts of flowers are dumb invitations to thee to shorten their stay at the temple."

The talkative Iba denounced the Assyrian for his interference with a religious observance that had done so much in attracting strangers to Babylon and adding to its commerce. Because the Assyrians had no such customs, being a people who worshipped the warlike Istar of Arbela more than they did the amorous Istar of Nineveh, was no reason why they should draw the anger of the great goddess upon Babylon. What the gods ordained must be for the best, and Iba did not sympathise with the spirit of infidelity he detected under these evasions.

The Ephesian said nothing in response to his companion's remarks, but resolved that if Prisca joined him, and their fortunes were cast with the Babylonians, she should not become a worshipper of Zarpanit.

The wall of the temple precinct next drew the attention of Cleon. Though built to withstand a siege, he saw that a well wielded battering ram, unembarrassed by a strong defensive force, could readily break it. Three thousand feet it extended east and west, and four thousand feet north and south. The bronze double-gate Ka-Khilibu, the Gate of Glory, was open, but the converging crowd had grown so thick that the chariot of Iba

made slow headway. Spacious though the grounds were, the Ephesian, on learning their dimensions, could not imagine how they would accommodate such an immense throng without unseemliness, considering the uses to which they were put. Iba explained that a space fully as large between the western wall and the Euphrates called " The Garden of Anu " was also temple land and free to the people. In case of siege, the necessary food for the temple attendants could be raised there, and the drain upon the supply of the people be minimised. In ordinary times the contributions of votaries more than supplied the needs of the priests, their wives and families, and the priestesses, holy women, singers and dancers attached to the shrines, who lived within the precincts.

The chariot drew near the gateway and Cleon obtained a part view of the interior of the enclosure. Around the base of the titanic, variegated tower was a congregation of temples of different proportion and the most dazzling colouration, surrounded by walled courts or themselves forming walls of courts. " This agglomeration of sacred edifices was due to the fact that the temple of Bel was a Babylonian Pantheon where the images and cult of the manifold gods of Chaldea were gathered together.* " " The Temple of Bel " was a phrase comprising them all. Just inside the gate stood a very large temple, and Cleon could see through the tangle of trees the shining roofs and glossy façades of others. The temple near the gate was Bit-Shagatha, seat of the goddess Zarpanit, creatress of seed.

Buildings with their tributary courts for open air ceremonials took up nearly a third of the ground space of the walled enclosure. The remainder, skillfully laid out in artificial hills, valleys and dells interspersed with sweet smelling trees and aromatic shrubs, formed " The Park of Istar." Between the portion reserved for the temples and this rolling landscape, flowed a sedgy stream with quaint and fanciful bridges, and looking beyond the

* Sayce

stream, Cleon descried in embowered nooks the beckoning maidens of the secret groves, and purple and scarlet tents with embroidered hangings.

Iba put his team in the stables within the precinct where his master had space reserved. Not far away they found the camp site usually occupied by soldiers when on guard, and, leaving word with the priestly superintendent to direct the company to the spot, they went with the stream of people to the temples.

Nearing the tower they came to an artful westward turn in the road, and on a sudden beheld the Temple of Bel from base to apex. It was at the end of a vista half a mile long and the view was framed by the glittering façades of sacred edifices which lined the opposite sides of three consecutive courts opening into each other. The holy houses along the sides of the courts had an outer covering of delicately tinted glazed bricks arranged in religious designs, and the cool gray pavement kept the eye fresh to feast upon the resplendent tower. There the setting sun directed its expiring strength, and as the orb of day dropped to the horizon, the shafts of the dying luminary retreated up the massive pyramid, and the shadow deepened at its base. The rays flushed the white slopes of the stage of Istar, but the sombre shadow, like an eternal tide, stole upward too. They flushed the dull orange of the stage of Merodach and empurpled the blue of Nebo. They caused the blood-red stage of Nergal to shine until the polished silver of the stage above caught the rosy reflection, and toward the last they made the golden summit to blaze with fiery refulgence and flash the hour of sunset to lesser temples, where priests stood aloft and watched.

"Gods!" ejaculated Cleon. "It is as if the world were coming to an end."

First on their way to the Tower, Iba and the Ionian traversed the Grand Court, eleven hundred and fifty-six feet in length by nine hundred in breadth. Beyond it extended the Court of Istar and Zamama, which,

"BEHELD THE TEMPLE OF BEL FROM BASE TO APEX."—*Page 54.*

though only half as wide, was nearly as long. From these courts six gates admitted to the temples and accessory buildings, named respectively the Grand Gate, the Gate of the Rising Sun, the Great Gate, the Gate of the Colossi, the Gate of the Canal, and the Gate of the Tower-view. All these gates were now open to the eager throng.

The glazed walls of the courts contained embossed figures, set off by tinted backgrounds with borders of tulips and honeysuckles. The pavement throughout of alabaster tiles had indented borders of tulips, cones and palmettes, painted in their natural colours. Great and small altars and purification fonts were abundant; stone altars upon which full grown animals were sacrificed, metal altars for sucklings, and altars for incense alone. The purification basins rested between the ears of kneeling bronze bulls.

These courts, glorious as they were, and surrounded by splendid and imposing buildings, served but to lead to the court wherein was the Tower of Bel. This court was considerably higher than its approaches, and four gates of solid brass marked it as a place singular in itself, as the heart and centre of the national worship. The tower and the temples immediately around it miniatured the world. The tower symbolised the mountain of the world and the temples at its base the four parts of the world. On its eastern side was the temple of Nebo the prophet and his consort, Tasmit the hearer. On the northern side were two temples, one to Ea and one to Nuska. On the southern, a single temple to Anu and Bel.

On the western side, fronting the courts of approach, was Bel's "Temple of the Lower Ground." This, the preëminent "House of the Land," extended for two hundred and eight feet alongside the black base of the tower, with two wings projecting at right angles for a distance of one hundred and sixty-six feet. One wing was thirty-four feet wide, the other one hundred and eight feet wide. Between them lay an open court fifty-

eight feet wide. The sanctuary for public worship monopolised the large wing. In its rear part the high priest had his abode.

In front of Bel's Temple of the Lower Ground was a space two hundred feet square, partly closed in by rows of colossal winged bulls with human heads adorned with horned caps. In the sockets of the eyes were crystals. Two great altars stood in this space, one for grown animals and one for sucklings. Upon the larger altar a thousand talents of frankincense were consumed at every festival of Zagmuku.

As Cleon walked with the multitude through the courts, and past the stone and silver altars where incense and other scented gums burned, he gazed in wonder at the seemingly gilded and varnished structures upon which priestly architects had exhausted their palette in combining elementary colours to form and depicture religious symbols.

Between the worship of Babylon and Ephesus ran a direct line of connection through Lydia, and the effigial symbols of the cults possessed recognisable similarities.

The exhibition of so much wealth and grandeur provoked a counter spirit in Cleon. "I will acknowledge to thee," said he, "that in all Ionia is there no temple to be compared to thine—in size. At Komana in Kappadokia, in the temple of Ma, six thousand eunuch priests and armoured priestesses attend the gods. Our Ionian writers have confounded these priestesses with the Amazons sung of by Homer. I visited the temple, on my way from Sardis to Nineveh, and found Ma to be none other than our own black-faced, multimammaed Artemis of Ephesus, and that the priestesses are the same as other holy women whose service in the temples bring revenue to the gods."

Iba glanced suspiciously at his companion. He had heard travellers' tales before. Whatever discussion might have arisen was diverted by the clangour, and clash, and piping of music, mingled with the cries of devotees.

Iba looked upward, and the eyes of Cleon followed his. Though the sun had not yet set, and the metallic surface of the two upper stories of the tower glowed from its rays, the moon was seen peering over the dark shoulder of the stage of Ninib, and amidst the crash of cymbals and tambourines, the fluting of pipes, the piercing tellels of women, the chanting of deep toned priests, and the smoke of altars, the queen of night crept upward in the eastern heaven. Men and women shouted joyously, for the bright side was the colour of a sword and the circumference of the darkened part was plainly visible, a conjunction which portended prosperity to the king and daily food in the mouth of the people. Through the inharmonic din came the steady, insistent notes of trained musicians, at first muffled, as they throbbed in the interior of the temples, and then vibrating in the open air, as parts of a holy procession swung together. The people made a passage, and the Ephesian saw coming from a circuit of the tower and its adjacent temples a parade of the great gods.

The gods were preceded by celebrants and, leading, following and intermixing with them, danced hundreds of young and comely priestesses, whose clothing consisted of a filmy tunic and the flowers they bore and scattered as they tripped along. Everywhere in the sinuous line were those joyful girls of the temples, and the tinkling of the tiny bells which weighed down their skirts of gauze lured to love and desire.

Also there came priests and acolytes with the sacred vessels and the smoking censers; gold and silver bowls containing oil and corn, lighted lamps of traditional shape and significance, the golden boat of Merodach, with its mysterious flame and turquoise pointed mast, golden candlesticks which by the number of branches indicated the god to which it was dedicated, and the ever-present pine cones, palms and portable altars, producing a garish pageant which was rendered still more striking by the vestment of the carrier priests. Some wore goat-

skin cloaks over robes of crimson, purple, and violet, some wore fillets, others horned caps, many had on tall, conical caps, from beneath which fluttered gay ribands, and a few wore a mitre in the form of the head of a fish, its scaly back and fan-like tail falling as a cloak behind. Knotted cords encircled the waists of some, on others a fringed tunic was conspicuous, many wore armlets, bracelets, necklaces, amulets, and earrings, and all, in tunic, cap or robe, were covered with embroidered stars, winged circles, pine-cones, pomegranates, holy trees, gryphons, crescents, crosses, trefoils, tridents.

Imposing as were the priests, musicians, and singers, their magnificence paled before the glory of the gods, who, borne aloft on the shoulders of garlanded priests, were visible to all beholders. Their garments, of rarest texture, scintillated with cloth of gold and glittering stones. They came in majesty, all the great gods, for on this day Nebo of Borsippa visited his father Bel of Babylon, and they appeared in public to assure their worshippers of their continued protection. Singers went before, players on instruments followed after, among them the damsels playing with timbrels, and as they marched through the multitude they were recognised with low murmurs, hurried supplications, and at times with joyous acclamations. The music swelled and vibrated, the lights of many branched candelabra twinkled fitfully, and through the packed assemblage ran little waves of admiring and devout comment.

On they passed, with crown and sceptre, axe and thunderbolt, serpent and horned caps, in chair of gold and throne of onyx, Bel lord of the world, Beltis of Babylon, Anu the lord of heaven, Ea the god of the deep, Nuzka the supreme messenger, Nebo the god of learning and augury, and Tasmit his wife, Sin the king of the lunar light, Shamas the sun-god, Nergal the god of destruction, Ninib the strong, Rimmon the master of abundance, Istar the goddess of fruitfulness and love, Allat queen of hades, Mamitu the maker of fate, Adar captain of the hosts of

the gods, Nerba the corn-god, Gibil the fire-god, Gu-enna goddess of the river reeds, Gula the queen of physicians, Innina the binder of the sickening fever, Laban the lord of foundations and brickwork, Mullil the lord of ghosts, Makhir the god of dreams, Nin-akhi-kudda the mistress of spells, Namtaru the plague-god, Serakh the serpent-god, and all the gods of heaven and earth. On they passed, and thick clouds of incense went up from every altar, while the clamour of music and men rose with the lascivious moon.

The eighth day of the festival had begun.

Chapter IX

THE INTERIOR OF THE SANCTUARY OF BEL

IBA sought a private entrance through Bel's Temple of the Lower Ground to reach the high priest's sanctum. Ascending the wide marble steps, flanked with human-headed bulls, he and Cleon came to a broad porch filled with idlers who watched the stirring scene spread out below in the perspective of courts. The procession could still be seen, though half a mile distant, and light after light blazed up in its wake, while the incense of many altars clouded the darkening heavens. Evening hymns arose on every side.

From the porch they entered a roomy vestibule in which stood a great lustral basin and also a brazen altar where priests were engaged in sacrificing a lamb. They sprinkled themselves and went on through swinging doors into the dimly lighted sanctuary, now thronged with devotees.

The interior of the temple, though simply arranged, was decorated to the extreme of richness. Along three sides were separate cells or chapels for gods, but for Bel there was a great half-domed alcove at the end opposite the entrance. There, amid the gold and crystal surroundings of the god of the land, thousands of candles flickered the year round. A railing of silver separated Bel's abode from the main sanctuary, and the minor chapels had gates of fine workmanship.

From a choir loft, above where Iba and Cleon stood at the door, an invisible choir started a seasonal hymn to Bel, and as the clear, pure notes reverberated through the capacious chamber the worshippers bent more and more unctuously in prayer or supplicatory rite, until

finally the voices of penitents and chanting priests mingled with the song of grace.

"O my mistress, in the trouble of my heart I raise in trouble the cry to thee.
O my mistress, speak pardon to thy servant; let thy heart be at rest;
To thy servant who suffers pain, grant mercy!"

Thus the penitent, and then the priest:

"O God and mother goddess that are angry with him, he calls upon thee!
Turn thy face towards him and take his hand!"

Again the penitent:

"O my mistress, from the day when I was little much am I yoked unto evil.
O my mistress, cause me to know what I have done, establish for me a place of rest!
Absolve my sin, lift up my countenance!"

And then the priest:

"Over his face, which for tears is not lifted up, falls the tear.
Over his feet, on which fetters are laid, falls the tear.
Over his hand, which from weakness is at rest, falls the tear.
Over his breast, which like a flute pipes forth its cries, falls the tear."

Again the penitent:

"Let me declare my doing, my doing which cannot be declared.
Let me repeat my word, my word which cannot be repeated.
O my God let me declare my doing, my doing which cannot be declared."

Thus penitents and priests recited before the altars of the gods.

Iba sent a message to the high priest, and while they awaited an answer Cleon inspected the seat of the joy of Bel's heart. It was, he observed, a minor pantheon in which Bel occupied the high place and the other gods "bowed before him and with awe submitted to him." The alcove was divided by a heavy curtain into two parts. In front of the curtain stood the golden image of the god, on a draped pedestal, and also the tables for offerings. Behind the curtain was the holy of holies, where none might enter save the high priest and a duly anointed king who had taken the hand of Bel. Upon this alcove the wealth and artistic genius of Babylon had been lavished. It was the Cell of the Lord of the Gods, the Quarter of Assembly, the Chapel of Fate. The panels of the wall were bright with gold and precious stones, and the cerulean ceiling, studded with gems, resembled the starry sky on a clear, frosty night.

In the main sanctuary and the other shrines the images, the gates, the walls, and the ceilings were profusely decorated with rare woods, precious stones, and the finest hangings, and throughout were paintings of the monsters that inhabited the earth before the advent of the gods; hideous beings which were produced by a two-fold principle. There appeared men, some of whom were furnished with two wings, others with four, and with two faces. They had one body, but two heads; the one that of a man, the other of a woman; they were likewise in their several organs both male and female. Other human figures were to be seen with the legs and horns of a goat; some had horses' feet, while others united the hind-quarters of a horse with the body of a man, resembling in shape the hippocentaurs. Bulls likewise were there with the heads of men; and dogs with four-fold bodies terminated in their extremities with the tails of fishes; horses also with the heads of dogs; men, too, and other

animals with the bodies of horses and the tails of fishes. In short, there were creatures in which were combined the limbs of every species of animals. In addition to these there were fishes, reptiles, serpents, and other animals which assumed each other's shape and countenance.*

When the summons came for Iba and Cleon to attend Khar-mes they were conducted through a door on the right-hand side of the alcove into the mysterious region behind the holy of holies where the Sakkanaku sat and brooded. Led by a priest carrying a candle, they traversed a labyrinth of narrow, but lavishly painted, passages. They passed sealed doors which Cleon at once surmised were the openings to the temple vaults, and his heart beat high as he thought of treasures in darkness and the hidden riches of secret places. He thought, too, of the shrine half way up the tower, and of the stages covered with gold and silver. At every turn in the succession of corridors were priests. They seemed to infest the place, and Cleon glowered at them.

Suddenly, on emerging from a small closet, they found themselves in the presence of the all-powerful Ishshaku-ziru of Bel, the Sakkanaku of Babylon.

Khar-mes was seated at a table, reading by the light of an oil lamp, for the hundreth time that day, the report of the chief of the astronomers. When the two laymen entered his eyes fastened upon their countenances with habitual scrutiny. Iba sank upon a knee and kissed the jewelled hand extended by the priest. Cleon did likewise.

"Welcome back to the gate of the gods, son of Idina" said Khar-mes. "Naught save good do I hear of thee and thy princely master."

"Always do we hope to be accounted faithful sons of Beltis," replied the secretary.

"Thou," said Khar-mes to the Ephesian, "art the Ionian captain whose fame as a warrior is not unknown even in remote Babylon."

* Berossus,

Cleon's heart swelled within him.

"Priestly visitors of thy tongue have we had," continued the high priest, "whom we taught something of the science and the mysteries of our holy religion."

"The Grecian mysteries were taught our forefathers by the gods," said Cleon.

"Thou speakest with the fearlessness of thy race. We can employ such fearlessness in war, and he who lifts his arm for Babylon will be protected by our great gods, whatever his nativity."

The priests' conciliatory tone had the effect intended.

"Pardon, great priest. The greatness of your gods is evident in these vast temple grounds, the equal of which is nowhere in the world. Of your mysteries I hope to become an initiate."

"Thou wilt see much that is familiar if thou hast completed the rites in Ephesus."

"The holy faith of secresy have I learned."

"The mysteries in all religions lead us back to the perfection from which we have departed, and the goal is common. If the gods wished all to worship alike, they would make all to think alike. On this I will instruct thee at a fitting time."

Cleon was about to express his eagerness to accept the implied invitation when a priest appeared, and, after the customary salutation, announced the arrival of the soldiers, and added: "The chamberlain of the harem of the gods, craves speech with thee, my master."

"Bid him enter," ordered Khar-mes.

The chamberlain, Belshazzar by name, was admitted, a stern visaged Chaldean of the type of his chief, different from the less ascetic and better groomed Semitic priests.

"Employment I had for thee, great sangutu," said Khar-mes turning his tablets to find a notation.

"The Bride of Bel—" suggested Belshazzar.

"Yes. Go thou with thy assistants to the house of Harimtu, daughter of Ina, the slave dealer, and bring

hither the maiden who takes the veil as a Bride of Bel this night."

The sangutu retired.

"Ina," remarked Cleon in surprise. "Why that is—"

"The Babylonian thou didst meet among the Sukhi" interrupted the high priest. To Iba he said: "Of this, nothing to Harimtu."

The incident astonished the Ephesian, but, remembering his experience in Sardis, he made no comment, conjecturing that Ina was used by Khar-mes as a political agent.

"That thou hast been selected as captain of the guard by Prince Nebuzaradan is surety for thee," said Khar-mes to Cleon, handing him a tablet. "Here is thy commission. Post a guard on the Terrace of Istar at the head of the stairway. Permit no person to pass up or down."

"Thou hast said, great priest; so will I do."

"Thine other soldiers retain in camp, under arms."

"Vain seems this care," continued the priest, addressing neither of his auditors, "yet the warning of the stars must be heeded. The danger point is the tower itself. It is not the season of lightning, and for clear weather the auguries are of one voice. Grant me knowledge, great gods!"

Iba made a motion to withdraw, when Khar-mes checked them.

"No Babylonian or Assyrian would dare tempt the curse of Mamit," he said, and, rising to his feet, he directed a dark glance at Cleon, as if suspicion entered his mind. "Remember," continued he, in a strained voice, which increased in acuteness as he proceeded, "Remember, Ephesian, the curse of Mamit upon those who despoil the palaces of the gods. May his name be effaced from his stelae in the temple of his god; May Nebo the supreme watcher strike him with misfortune and ruin! May all the great gods curse him with irrevocable male-

diction! May he be pursued as a nameless wretch, and his seed fall under servitude! May he find nowhere a refuge under the skies or in any abode of man whatsoever! May he be clothed in leprosy as a garment and given up to wild beasts! Before his enemies may his corpse be cast down, and may his bones be carried away!"

Iba and Cleon shrank from him, as though the imprecation were being hurled at them. Khar-mes noticed their terror and quickly recomposed himself.

"Fear not. For you, the faithful, may the divine spirit and the divine colossos, the givers of blessings, alight upon your heads. Over your lives never may they cease to watch!"

With a wave of his hand, the high priest dismissed them and was speedily lost once more in contemplation of the report of the astronomer.

Iba and Cleon did not return by the way they came, but proceeded through the main building to the stairs of the tower, where a bitumen torch on a bronze pole cast a ruddy glare. The priests on duty there relinquished the post to them, and shortly afterward the soldiers for the watch, ten in number, arrived. Iba then departed. Cleon and five of the men ascended the stairs to the Terrace of Istar, the remaining soldiers taking station at the bottom.

Chapter X

CLEON ON THE TOWER OF BEL—THE THEFT OF THE AMULET OF BEL

THE guardsmen grumbled among themselves over their long detention from the pleasures of the festival and, lazily leaning upon the broad parapet, pictured in imagination the enjoyments of the surrounding groves. They watched with longing the concluding sacrifices and processions in the illuminated courts stretching one after the other to Zarpanit's many-lighted Temple of Union near the gate of Khilibu. The air was heavy with incense. In the Park of Istar torches flamed ruddily in spots or blazed up and faded like fire-flies, and the care-free laughter of revellers, mixing incoherently with the chanting of hymns, cast a glamour over the spirits of the Ephesian.

Ever and anon the tender, deep-throated coo of the turtle-dove could be heard inviting all to mutual endearment.

Cleon paced restlessly over the terrace until he came to the steps leading to the stage above. He hesitated, mounted upward a short distance, stopped and descended to the terrace. "By Dionysus!" he exclaimed, impatient with himself. "The tower has bewitched me. There is sorcery in the air of this Babylon."

He strolled toward the guard. "Why should I shun the upper shrine?" he mused. "It is not forbidden to mount the terrace, and there is naught to be feared here." To his lieutenant he said: "I would see thy great city by moonlight, Tuna, from the resting stage. Sound thy whistle long and loud if aught occurs to disturb thee."

"The gods go with thee," replied the officer.

Again the Ephesian ascended. He noted that the sides of the tower, although appearing from a distance to be quite smooth, were much indented and contained numerous niches. He took a seat on the parapet before the embossed leaves of a huge double door on the third landing. "The midway temple," he thought, "filled with the riches of the gods." Sealed bars protected the door, but talismanic figures in solid bronze upon the portals guarded the interior more effectually than seals and bars.

The Ephesian was determined to satisfy his curiosity about the stages of silver and gold. So, after a short rest, he proceeded.

When he reached the sixth stage he tapped with his sword handle the silver plates composing its surface, and tapped again and again.

"Silver," said he under his breath.

He gave a sigh of relief as he set foot upon the seventh terrace. He was beyond the region of smoke, but the far-reaching fumes of myrrh and frankincense, rising from the temples on the four sides of the tower, curled around the walls, as they had been doing for fifteen centuries past. The temples at the base were hid from his view, and the illuminated courts beyond could be traced through the smoke only by a long pink blur. Over the city hung a ruddy haze from the torches blazing in front of shops and residences. The torches on the royal mound made the king's palace look like a great star on the southern horizon, and almost, it seemed, within an arrow's range, lay the Temple of Union, where the women with cords about them sat in the ways and burned bran for perfume.

Cleon sauntered around the silent, golden temple, contemplating the choir of nightly stars, and searching the heavens for familiar signs. The moon shone with startling clearness. Over in the west three-pointed, ruddy-hearted Scorpion watched the chariot of Phœbus sink into the bosom of the Sea of the Setting Sun, and Cleon knew that at that moment every alchemist in Greece was

endeavouring to transmute iron into gold. As his eye roamed from star to star his mind wandered over the lands he had traversed, and he thought: "Here was I on such a day, or here."

"Poor Prisca," he murmured. "What have the fates for thee?"

Drawing an imaginary line from the star in the tail of the dog, by which sailors guided themselves at sea, to yellow Arcturus and the daughters of the bier, he calculated that a plummet dropped from near its middle would land upon Ionian soil.

"What is she doing now?" he soliloquised.

In his perambulation of the terrace he came to the open doorway of the temple. The interior was unlighted save for two wax candles near the veil of the sanctuary, and between the candles, on a pedestal of gold, was a golden statue of Bel, seated and undraped.

Prisca and the stars vanished from the mind of Cleon as he ascended the few steps leading to the temple door, with no intention, however, of intruding upon the god's privacy. The leaves of the door he perceived were of ivory overlaid with red gold thinner than any gold-beater of Greece could hammer it.

Silence and lonesomeness brooded over the place. He was above the noises of the earth, and no sacrilegious zephyr touched the unflickering lights.

A shimmer, a faint, tremulous gleam of an object on the breast of the sitting image caught and fascinated the gaze of the Ephesian. The veil crinkled, and in the stillness he fancied he heard its soft rustle. Cleon moved forward without conscious reflection. The impulse stirred the scented atmosphere, and his stealthy footstep started a voiceless babel of sound, noises impalpable as the folding of birds' wings or the sweep of a swarm of notes.

Was it a sigh, an echo, or the stifled throb of the blood gushing in his ear? The lights shivered, and the glimmering object on the image flared suddenly like the angry

eye of Aldebaran, for an instant only, and then darkened and faded, as the fire of the glow-worm fades. Cleon's eyes shone responsively in the semi-darkness. He moved toward the image, and a film like ashes on a dying ember settled over the lambent lure.

Midway to the statue remembrance of the guard on the Terrace of Istar came unbidden to the Ephesian, and he paused. In his perturbed fancy he beheld the lieutenant lifting a whistle to sound the summons. He listened for the shrill note, yet his eyes never left the dully glowing point of light on the breast of the image. His cessation of motion appeared to have an occult influence or to impart new heat, for again it flared with weird brilliancy through its ashen pall. Cleon shuddered and stepped forward more quickly.

Again it paled, and a long sigh broke gently upon the charmed air. Cleon thought it came from the statue, and, for the first time since entering the holy edifice, realised in a vague, impersonal way that he was trespassing upon the great god's seclusion. Something more powerful than his will, however, drove him onward. Within a few feet of the sullenly glowing object he stopped.

"An amulet!" he ejaculated.

His voice echoed and reverberated through the sanctuary, releasing the pent up noises. He heard the mysterious rustling of wings, the swish of colliding air-currents, and the seething of distant waters.

Cleon advanced another step. The amulet hung by a thin chain of gold. What was it? What stone? Emerald, carbuncle, ruby, aphroseline?

Stretching forth his hand, Cleon daintily and without touching the golden image lifted the amulet from its resting place. Instinctively, he knew not why, he paused, and knowing not why his eyes were drawn from the gem to the middle parting of the curtains. Instinctively, up the heavy fold his sight travelled until his straining gaze encountered two glistening eyes staring at him with horror-stricken fixity. Then upon the still air, broke the

long, shrill call of a whistle. Uttering a cry of terror, Cleon wrenched himself from where he stood, turned and fled. Out through the door he ran, the note of the whistle ringing in his ears. Down the steps to the Terrace of Silver he plunged, and with the same safe instinct of place that guided him out of the Apaturian grove he found the Terrace of Nergal, the Terrace of Nebo and the Terrace of Merodach. Trembling in every limb from the violence of his exertion and with the perspiration streaming down his face, he dragged his stumbling feet after him to the Terrace of Istar. The guards in their long cloaks looked like spectres in the moonlight but they were human and a little of his natural intrepidity and guile returned.

"I heard thy call, lieutenant," he said interrogatively to the officer.

"I sounded no call, captain," replied the officer.

"I heard it distinctly" Cleon insisted, with acerbity. "I am not one to be trifled with."

"No such intent had I," the lieutenant courteously replied. "Shalman! Ugara!" he cried to the nearest soldiers who joined the two officers. "Was a whistle sounded here this night?"

"No, Tuna" both responded.

"Know, Ephesian," continued the officer curtly. "We Chaldeans learn first of all things to speak the truth."

"Forgive me, lieutenant," said Cleon, his brain in a whirl. He raised his right hand to press his forehead when he saw that his fingers clutched a strange substance. It was the amulet, burning with such fierce and radiant fire that Cleon for a second was blinded. Closing his hand to conceal the gem, he felt the terror of his situation creeping over him. The soldiers had not seen the amulet, though looking at him with restrained surprise.

"I must have fallen asleep," he said apologetically, with halting speech. "Forget my remark, friends. Much has happened to-day to confuse me."

"Willingly, captain," responded the officer, and the soldiers echoed, "Willingly."

"Sleep overcame me as I rested near the midway temple, and I dreamed an evil dream. It is punishment for sleeping on duty. Say no more about it."

Cleon walked away and made a pretence of promenading to and fro. When his back was turned he stowed the amulet under his broad belt. The holy gem oppressed him. It could bring him nothing but misfortune. The problem was, to restore it to the temple.

To this moment his recollection of the eyes staring at him from between the curtains had been submerged in his panic. Now the thought of them rose like a ghastly apparition, and a cold sweat broke out over his body. Detection meant death, but it was not death he feared. Infamy, infamy. Better a thousand deaths than infamy.

No, he must restore the amulet during the night. He could do that. He would creep up to the temple and place it on the table. Why not go boldly to the high priest and confess the truth?

"Why not?" he repeated aloud, grasping at this solution.

"Why not?" echoed a voice at his side.

Cleon's feelings were on edge. He sprang back and drew his sword. Two cloaked figures stood before him, and he lifted his weapon.

"Hold!" cried one of the intruders, who, dropping the cloak from his face, revealed the calm, grave features of the high priest.

"Thou art ready with thy weapon, Ephesian" said Khar-mes.

"How didst thou pass the guards without their challenge?" confusedly asked Cleon.

"There are more roads than one to Babylon," the priest answered. "We have a thing for thee to do which commands despatch. A daughter of Babylon selected by the great god Bel for his harem has this night been stolen by a Jew. She must be found before daybreak,

Kill the Jew and, if necessary to prevent an outcry, kill the maiden. Belshazzar here, the chamberlain of the harem of Bel, will accompany thee. Be swift, silent, discreet, and I will reward thee. Remember, thou art serving Khar-mes."

Though trembling with emotion, Cleon managed to preserve outward calm. "I hear and obey," he answered.

Khar-mes pointed toward the stairs and the chamberlain strode that way. The Ephesian followed.

Chapter XI

HARIMTU'S ZAGMUKU BANQUET

"SUMMONED," replied Kak-Merodach, "by the lady Harimtu to assist in the rejoicing over thy return."

Prince Nebuzaradan's face flushed. "I hold thee to be my friend, poet."

"I am that," the other asserted with a sparkle of heat.

"Then, my friend, in thy songs this night couple me not with Nineveh."

"So be it," Kak-Merodach responded in most hearty spirit.

The two, the prince and the poet, had met at the lodge gate of the house of Harimtu, and, slaves having taken charge of Nebuzaradan's chariot and Kak-Merodach's cart, they sauntered through the thick-hedged, well lighted garden. Other guests for the banquet were arriving, and scores of perfectly trained slaves rapidly disposed of horses, chariots, carts, and torch-bearers, bestowing them on a liberal scale, for such banquets frequently extended over one night. Guests sometimes remained a month, or until their substance was squandered.

Barak, the steward, met and conducted them to a reception court. His interview with Kabtiya, the son of Egibi, gave him a self-satisfied feeling. He had imparted to the merchant prince a secret concerning the nativity of the Jewish girl that immediately enlisted the influence of the Egibis in her behalf. Whether this information was true, Barak did not know; he believed it highly probable, and it served a purpose. He made several attempts to see the maiden, but his mistress, divining mischief, kept him employed in receiving her visitors.

"We have missed thee of late, son of Eri," remarked

Musallin, the son of Arrabi, to the poet, as they entered the reception hall. "It was told at court and in the houses of thy friends that thou hadst become an agriculturist and wert raising a rare variety of bean for the market."

The association of Kak-Merodach with beans excited mirth. He, too, laughed gayly.

"Thou knowest, son of the vizier," he answered, "I had a patrimony sufficient for any man's wants. Yet it went—pouf!—where, no one knows. Barak, here, could tell how it was that many good shekels escaped me—but he need not—"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Iddin, the son of Sulu, of the family of Egibi. "No, he need not tell, and thou canst not take refuge in the law of usury, through dread of gossip."

"What is this agricultural accusation?" asked Nebuzaradan. "I cannot think of Kak-Merodach and industry with the same mind."

"Does not my fame reach to Nineveh?" rejoined the poet, feigning pique.

"Yes, illustrious one, but there gossips are scarce."

Meanwhile, attendants were divesting the guests of their street garments, bathing their feet, laving their hands, sprinkling them with perfumes, and supplying such lickerish drink as their fancy craved.

"No tale-bearer acquainted thee with my good fortune?"

"None."

This did offend the poet, but he concealed his chagrin and called for drink.

Musallin explained to Nebuzaradan. "Know, my cousin, that at the wedding feast of our glorious prince and the beautiful Amytis of Media, our poet sang a hymn which so pleased the generous Nebuchadnezzar and his amiable bride that he was showered with gifts in themselves a fortune for any man of less thirst. A thousand pardons." Musallin interjected when his hearers

had duly applauded his jibe. "I should say, any man of less expensive habits."

"I have a couplet in reserve for thee," retorted Kak-Merodach.

The smile instantly left Musallin's face. "With a bit of good news will I bribe thee to silence. Of that, later. This hymn, my lord, was of quality so exquisite, so well by its author was it sung, that not only did Nebuchadnezzar give gifts of gold and silver, but also a fine estate on the Royal canal, with slaves, house and stores of wine. Since then Kak-Merodach has been seen abroad rarely, and his friends spread the rumor of the bean to goad him out of his exile and separate him from his wine."

"I am enjoying the almost forgotten experience of being a landed proprietor," said Kak-Merodach, "and the wine is from the king's presses."

Most of the guests having arrived, they proceeded to the banquet hall where Harimtu was waiting. Though burdened by forebodings of evil, she played the part of hostess with her usual tact. She had closed the communicating passage between the two parts of the establishment and given orders to Kina the eunuch to permit no one except a priest from the temple, not even the steward, to enter the private grounds. These precautions taken, she felt free to devote time to the banquet, as she had a reputation to maintain. Not many of the nobility of Babylon possessed greater wealth than this exactress of gold, whose favours were for princes. It was her rule to slip away from the banquet hall before the festivities became an orgy, in which men and women joined without distinction. Thus appreciating herself was she the more highly esteemed. Poets and story-tellers, musicians and singers, gathered about her board and praised the excellence of her wines, and rarity and delicacy of her viands, but that which attracted the rich and extravagant to her entertainments was the fame of her dancing and singing girls.

The banquet progressed decorously throughout the

initiatory courses, though the light wines were loosening the tongues of the guests. The tables were resplendent with gold and crystal, and graceful vases filled with flowers on stands and brackets nearly hid the richly painted walls. The fifty or more guests sat at tables containing as centre pieces great bowls of flowers. Beside the guests sat beautiful dancing and singing girls, and women of nimbleness of wit as well as nimbleness of body. Soft and sensuous music from the garden floated into the hall.

A group, of which Nebuzaradan and Musallin, as kinsmen of the king, were the honoured ones, sat with Harimtu and some of her women in a recess slightly elevated above the floor of the banquet hall, where they were visible to all. Here was Kak-Merodach, who pronounced toast after toast and was ever foremost in proposing them. Beside Harimtu sat the son of Sula, who was endeavouring to distribute a portion of the riches of his ancestors in return for the distinction of being known as the favoured suitor of the celebrated woman. In the company-at-large were marbani or descendants of demigods, sons of Bel-rimanni, Sin-Shaduna, Nur-Sin, Sinkuderna, Egibi, and other old Babylonian families whose genealogies extended back into the mythological period when the gods wedded mortals. There were foreigners, too, among them a prince from impoverished Elam, a Hittite merchant from Carchemish, an envoy from the land of Nairi, an Aramean trader with a scheme for a new port, an Indian who dealt in gems, and a Phenician heir on his travels; but the majority was of the younger generation of Babylon.

"Is this Amytis all that report says?" Nebuzaradan asked his cousin.

"Her beauty excels the beauty of all the women of Babylonia."

"The loveliest maiden ever I beheld," said Nebuzaradan, half musingly, "I saw by chance in this house. She must be a woman now."

"Thou wilt not know our Nebuchadnezzar. Marriage and the duties thrust upon him by the king's infirmities have changed him, but thou wilt love him none the less."

"He is my king's son."

"Let thine ear be disposed to judge favourably of him, Nebuzaradan."

"And so, may the evil tongue depart elsewhere," they heard Kak-Merodach saying, at the conclusion of a toast, in compliment to the lady Harimtu, "and may the god of the house dwell in thy house."

"The lady Harimtu!" one cried who was full of wine.

The words flew from table to table. Guests and women held their cups aloft, and every radiant face was turned toward her. She smilingly held up her cup and they drank together.

Calls and pleasant wishes were showered on Nebuzaradan, on Musallin, on Kak-Merodach, on all the good companions, nor were the women neglected in this courtesy. This continued at intervals through an elaborate service of meats, and with their minds quieted, their souls tranquillised, and their hearts at ease, they waited the main feature of the banquet.

"Thou didst mention good news," said the poet to the son of the vizier. "Good news, like good wine, is ever welcome."

Musallin had passed the point where state secrets are guarded. "The king has work for thee at Nineveh," he replied.

Nebuzaradan scowled at the mention of Nineveh.

"At Nineveh?" Kak-Merodach repeated.

"Yes, son of Eri. The long siege has brought on restlessness among the mixed people that have settled in Assyria and among the camp followers, and discontent is spreading among the fighting men. It will be thy duty to rekindle the fire of hatred against the Assyrians."

"And leave my tender beans, my lovely corn, my delicious melons!" exclaimed the poet indignantly, and so loud that his words were heard by the others in the

alcove. They shouted with laughter, and though he at first was annoyed, Kak-Merodach soon laughed with them. The merriment was cut short by a lively change in the music, a signal they recognised, and simultaneously the male attendants departed.

Suddenly the cymbals in the garden crashed, and there burst into the room scores of beautiful young girls, clothed in transparent robes, and redolent with ointment and perfume. Some carried garlands with which they merrily loaded the guests, and some scattered flowers over floor and table as a sower scatters seed. A second bevy brought in basins, and ewers, and napkins, for washing and drying the hands of the banqueters.

Louder rose the music, competing with the cries, the laughter, and the coy screams of the revellers. In the midst of the gay confusion stalwart eunuchs entered, bearing the wine bowls, immense receptacles of chased silver. They were greeted with an outburst of enthusiasm, the men beating their palms upon the tables, and the women clapping their hands. The names of the eunuchs were called aloud in compliment.

Harimtu arose and stepped to the front of the alcove. Instantly there was silence.

"Who, my friends," asked she, "shall mingle the wines?"

"Kak-Merodach, the son of Eri," they cried as one.

"Kak-Merodach, the poet! By Nergal, none other," roared Nebuzaradan, smiting the table with his fist.

"Kak-Merodach, whom the god of beans has abundantly blessed!" chimed in the son of Sula.

"A libation, my friends," said the poet.

"A libation! A libation!"

Kak-Merodach poured a libation, and the revellers did likewise. Then he called for certain utensils and ingredients, which were at hand. Standing where all could follow his movements, he measured the essences and put them together in a huge mortar. No one spoke above a whisper for fear of disturbing the nicety of his calcula-

tions. To the essences he added aromatics, and these he pounded with a pestle, moistening the pulp with other essences. Time and thought were suspended when he stirred the compound, and there was absolute silence when he lifted the pestle and tasted the perfumed paste that clung to it. A beatific smile spread over his face, and the anxious gazers knew that he was content to be judged by his handiwork.

"Is it well, O man of fate?" asked Iddin.

"It is well," replied the poet.

"Then may the god who pronounces blessings and causes good fortune to flow smile upon thee, and all here assembled; may oil unceasing and the wine of blessedness be thy food, and may thou come to hoar old age, son of Eri."

Again they cried "Kak-Merodach" and they hurled good names and pleasant wishes at him. The poet smilingly resumed his seat.

Meanwhile eunuchs had emptied amphoræ of wine into the bowls and particularly trained slaves had dissolved the mixture of drugs, essences, and aromatics in the wine.

While the revellers watched the mingling, slaves brought in vessels of gold, silver, and crystal containing dried and fresh fruit, confections of honey, and diverse pleasures for the taste, and the cups were set forth, cups of purest crystal, of jewelled bronze, of burnished silver, of embossed glass, of wrought amber, and of gold with gemmed rims. These the young girls seized and, hastening to the wine bowls, filled them and distributed them among the men and women.

No one appeared to be of lighter heart than the giver of the banquet. Exhilarated with wine, fragrant with balsams, her waist encircled with blooming roses, she seemed to have no care.

"Tell me, Khamma," said Nebuzaradan to the damsel beside him, "Is there still in the household of the lady Ha-

rimtu, a young girl whom she formerly kept secluded in her private apartments?"

"There is such a girl, my lord, but we know of her by hearsay only. We are not permitted to enter the private grounds."

"Ah! Thine eyes are like twin stars, Khamma. Thou art a pearl of great price. Thy aspect banishes from the heart all anxiety. I love thee, Khamma."

"O my lord, my heart is entangled in the snare of thy love."

On a signal the music ceased.

"My friends," said Harimtu, rising to her feet that all might see and hear "the gods have vouchsafed another year of prosperity to us and to our beloved city under our great king. No enemy ravages the land, the country is established, daily food is in the mouth of the people. The gods have come forth, their divinity has been exalted and we should rejoice our hearts with food, and wine, and music, filling our mouth with laughter and our tongue with singing. If you have cares, wine will banish them; if you have woes, music will exorcise them; if you have ills, mirth will cure them. What have we to do with labour, care, or woe? Our fates were determined by the stars under which we were born, and none may alter the immutable tablets of destiny. Therefore, my friends, eat, drink, and be joyous, for our time on earth is short, and the way to Arali is long and dusty."

Harimtu raised her cup and took a deep draught, and the women imitated her. With a shout that rang and reverberated through the halls, courts, and corridors, the guests rose to their feet, and, as the mistress handed her half-emptied cup to Iddin, accepting his in return, her maids and the men beside them exchanged cups and the musicians struck up a spirited tune barred by a haunting, recurrent note. The carouse was begun.

Harimtu intended to remain to witness the debut of the Skythians. Her departure was hastened by an unex-

pected happening. Before the first dance concluded Kina noiselessly entered and spoke softly in her ear.

"The maiden has disappeared, my mistress. We have searched everywhere and cannot find her."

Harimtu darted a keen look at Barak. The steward was attending carefully to his duties. Catching his eye, she beckoned him to her. "Where is Shaghulla?" she asked sternly in a low tone.

The question startled him, though it should have been no surprise. "I know not," he answered.

"She has gone, and I suspect thee of connivance."

Barak could not conceal his trepidation, but said nothing. Telling Kina and Barak to await in her private apartments, she dismissed them, and, whispering an excuse, to Iddin, she slipped away.

The dancers appeared. The space in the centre of the hall for the performers was carpeted with flowers, the juices of which were expressed in stealthy odours by the rosy feet of the women. A geometrical dance came first, in which girls were dressed to represent boys, a dance of juvenescent love and wooing. The music changed from the throbbing monotone to a stirring march, as the dancers coquetted and gracefully turned and twisted into circles, squares, triangles, accelerating their steps beyond simple figures to intricate movements, until the sight of the swaying, oscillating figures and the sound of the tremulous, resonant music set the blood of the spectators to tingling. At its fullest, a trumpet note rose above the concord, and the dancers dispersed like a startled covey of young partridges, so quickly that the onlookers had to reassure each other that the whole scene was not an illusion.

The dancers, returning, sat with the men and clamoured for wine.

Then came mummers with grotesque animal masks, whose dances were typical of the creatures they represented, assuming the roles faithfully, and producing absurd situations which called forth laughter and ap-

plauding comment. Girls skilled in tumbling and contortion amazed the beholders of their wonderful acts.

All the while, from the garden came soft music with its muffled recurrent monotone. Out under the trees the leaves rustled with impotent gossip. The air in the banquet hall grew heavy.

The dances became freer. Samkhat the enticer, and Kharimtu, the persuader, came forth, and with waving arms and weaving figures enticed Eabani, the wise and pure, who shunned mankind, yet knew men and countries. He sat at Kharimtu's feet, she bent down her face, she spake, and his ears heard, and before her speech the wisdom of his heart flew away and disappeared.

The music stirred the hearts of the banqueters strangely, and the shining bodies of the women glistened in the lamplight. The feet of the wine bearers lagged.

"Why, oh poet," Iddin asked of Kak-Merodach, "did the beasts of the field shun Eabani after he succumbed to the woman?"

"Nay, I know not, son of Sula," answered the poet, who had imbibed generously and had not forgotten the taunt about beans. "Ask thy mistress Harimtu." The young man laughed uneasily.

"Her hostages are here," he replied, reaching forth and seizing the dancers who enacted Samkhat and Kharimtu.

The others laughed and applauded. Some went forth into the open, where lanterns invited them to bowered nooks.

"Soon they play the Errand of Istar," whispered Khamma into Nebuzaradan's ear.

"The stars charm me not," said Kak-Merodach, "when Harimtu sets forth wine."

"The wine charms me not when the son of Eri recites," said the woman who sat beside him.

In the next dance the search of the goddess Istar for her lover Tammuz was the motive. Tammuz, being mortally wounded by a boar, Istar descended into the

netherworld of the dead, in search of the magical waters of life. She who enacted Istar appeared, a superb daughter of Babylon, large of eye, feline in grace, and her full round chin was gemmed with a dimple. Her raiment sparkled with precious stones, her crown was studded with them. As she danced, pearls and rubies and sapphires fell from her whirling robes. She danced rapidly or slowly, as the music played, and in pantomine depicted the goddess passing the seven gates of hell, at each gate losing a portion of her attire; first went the crown on her head, and then in succession the earrings of her ears, then necklace of her neck, the ornaments of her breasts, the gemmed girdle of her waist, the bracelets of her hands and feet, and, finally, the cincture of her body, for verily as one enters the world so must he leave it.

The dancer stood like a statue, her head bent, her hands clasped in front, while Kak-Merodach recited the sequel: Allat, the queen of hades struck Istar, and she was a nonentity in hell. But, in the absence of the goddess of love, the passions which peopled the world were suspended, and the gods realised that the earth would soon become an uninhabited desert, that no longer the sweet savour of sacrifice would rise, unless Istar resumed her functions.

The music from the garden wailed and sobbed, with that iterant thrumming note ever pulsating on the hot air. Men's heads dropped over the clinging burdens in their arms. The Phenician youth slid stolidly to the floor, and moved not. Iddin, lifting two maids, one on each arm, staggered forth.

"Sweets," he hicupped, "I know a couch of roses where we may rest."

So the god Ea compelled Allat to pour the waters of life over Istar, and the god Namtar restored to her, as they repassed the gates, the cincture of her body, the bracelets of her hands and feet, the gemmed girdle of her waist, the ornaments of her breasts, the jewels of her necklace, the earrings of her ears, the crown upon her head, she re-

turned to earth and over Tammuz poured the pure waters, and he came again to life, she anointed him with precious oil, clothed him with a purple robe, and they loved, and men and women once more loved, the beasts mated, and the world sang for joy.

The music gradually increased in volume as the poet recited, and when he closed the cymbals crashed, and the flutes piped shrilly; but ever the throbbing monotone could be heard.

"And thus, O friends, was love born again," cried Musallin, standing erect with his arm around the waist of the Istar dancer. "Love, whose return to earth this night we celebrate according to the ancient rites."

Chapter XII

DISCOVERY OF THE FLIGHT OF THE YOUNG GIRL —PASIYA THE ACCURSED

WHEN Harimtu deserted the banqueters she hastened to her private rooms, to which she had been preceded by Belshazzar, the chamberlain priest, and Kina the eunuch, but not Barak.

"Where is the steward?" she asked of the eunuch.

"It is not a matter of a steward," interrupted the priest, impatiently. "Where is the Bride of Bel?"

"Patience, revered vassal of Bel," responded the woman, with great deference. She repeated her inquiry.

"I know not," Kina answered. "Question the gatekeeper, I pray thee, my mistress."

Harimtu looked grave. Summoning Gaga, she bade her find Barak.

"Where hast thou searched?" she asked of Kina.

"Over the private residence and grounds have I searched most thoroughly, noble mistress."

"Then she escaped or was carried away through the garden gate," declared Harimtu. "Go, Kina, and ascertain what detains Barak and Gaga."

The frail temper of the mistress was rapidly giving way, but she dared not betray her apprehension to the silent, watchful priest.

Presently Gaga came running in. "O, my mistress," she cried, casting herself on her knees, "Barak, too, has gone. Pasiya says he has left the grounds."

The sentence was not completed before Harimtu had the slave by the hair and was jerking and dragging her over the floor.

"Accursed!" she screamed in a paroxysm of rage. "May the plague seize thee, and the fever bind thee."

Kina entering, she struck him in the face. "Thou, may the foulness of the city ditches be thy food, the waters of the sewer thy drink!"

"Mercy, my mistress!" the wretched Kina implored, from his place on the floor.

"Mercy, my mistress!" moaned Gaga in accents of anguish.

"And, thou, Barak, wherever thou art," she continued, turning her invectives against the absent. "May the handmaid of the lilu embrace thee fatally. And thou, O Shaghulla, may thy breast be forever bitter, may—"

"Gently, daughter," said the impassive priest.

The coldly spoken words restored her composure.

"May thy slave speak, oh my mistress?" asked Kina, observing that the worst of the storm was over.

"Speak, slave," said the chamberlain, ignoring Harimtu.

"Pasiya the gatekeeper ever hath been subservient to the son of the Jew," Kina explained. "Why the steward fled, secretly he may know."

The priest's brow wrinkled. "Now I bethink me," said he, "the gatekeeper did hold me over long at the gate. Bring him hither."

Pasiya came, a round-faced man with small eyes. He read danger in the looks of those about him.

'Of the coming and going of Barak," he said, in answer to Harimtu's questions, "I know naught save that he comes and goes."

"The slave lies," said Belshazzar shortly, and sent for two priests who were waiting for him. "To the torture chamber," he ordered, indicating Pasiya.

The gatekeeper was too astounded to remonstrate, and the priests led him away.

"And now, my daughter," resumed Belshazzar, "what message hast thou for the great high priest?"

"Tell him," she replied decisively, "that the virgin the

gods selected as a Bride of Bel has been stolen away by my Jewish slave, Barak, and that I turn over to him my house, my servants, and myself."

"As this is an affair of the gods," said Belshazzar, "to no one must aught be said. The punishment," continued he, grimly, addressing the wondering Kina and Gaga, "of blabbing is cutting out the tongue, slashing off the hands, and throwing the bleeding body into the pit of lions."

The trembling slaves fell upon their faces and grovelled before him, clamorously protesting their fidelity to the gods. Disregarding them, and haughtily unobservant of Harimtu's pale face, Belshazzar hastened away to communicate his tidings to Khar-mes.

It was a mixture of emotions that drove Barak to the street. Reason told him there was no danger of the maiden succumbing to the enticements of the grove, jealousy hurled him toward the Park of Istar. Nebuchadnezzar's feast did not begin until midnight, and the evening was only half spent. The groves were yet full of lights, and the moon made deep shadows. The savour of roasting meat mingled with the diffused odour of myrrh and frankincense. Barak knew that it would be useless to look for the Jewess in the depths of the park, among the devotees of the goddess. So he joined the crowd that hovered near the roasting pits, where, if she obeyed his instructions, she would linger. If apprehended, he could maintain that he was there in his mistress's interest. Occasionally he wandered past the temple of Zarpanit to Khilibu gate, hoping to see her following him, but invariably he was disappointed; though it better suited his plans that she should delay, he longed for her presence. The time dragged, and he was a jarring discord in the hum of pleasure.

Thus harrowed in his thoughts, and pacing nervously about, he heard murmurs of a different nature to the light-hearted chatter of the devotees. There were notes of pity, of horror, of execration, which grew more distinct as

something neared the spot where stood Barak, something before which all else fell back.

An advancing figure groped and stumbled along the wide lane thus made for it. Stick in hand, fumbling the ground in front as he walked laboriously, came a man whose broad features were wrung with agony. Upon his face, upturned as one who seeks to peer from underneath a bandage, shone the lurid light of the roasters' fire, and where eyes should have glinted with life and animation appeared two round scorched holes from which two thin streams of blood drooled to the lips, joined a similar stream leaking from the mouth and dribbled off the chin in quivering drops.

"Accursed of the gods," murmured the people who saw, and, with subdued voices they recited conjurations.

"A victim of the priest's torture chambers," thought Barak.

"Great indeed must have been his sin," said a nearby woman to the man with her.

"Behold!" the man rejoined.

The accursed one had opened his mouth and thrust shaking fingers into the dark orifice. Blood that had been damned by the lips flowed forth and ran in two streams where before it had dribbled.

"If only he could weep," said Barak, aloud.

The people moved further apart as the man stopped. Raising his face so that the black caverns of his eyes were uppermost, he made a gurgling noise in his throat. His hand with its gory fingers dropped despairingly to his side, a whimpering, shuddering sob shook his shoulders, and he groped on.

"Over his eyes and over his mouth the priests have put a covering," said the man with the woman. "Merodach protect me from the vengeance of the gods!"

"And I, oh god of Babylon!" responded the woman.

But Barak's eyes were now fastened on the distorted face of the accursed one. Could it be? Yes, through the mask of agony and suffering he recognised Pasiya

the gatekeeper. Pasiya, blinded with red hot irons and detongued with sharp pincers.

A sickening thought sunk into his heart. He slunk back out of the ken and the blind man Pasiya the accursed groped on. He slunk back against a gayly-robed priest of Bel who plucked him by the sleeve.

"Thou art summoned, Barak, slave of Harimtu," said the priest.

Chapter XIII

THE HOLY ORACLE OF ERIDU

THE eyes that peered at Cleon the Ephesian through the division of the curtain in the upper sanctuary of the Temple of Bel and startled him into flight were those of the woman who was there on the eighth day of the festival for the service of the god and in a manner known only to the initiated she had communicated with Khar-mes. Information of the desecration. however, came after Cleon had been sent to find the maiden and Barak. Her description of the Ephesian convicted him of the theft. The audacity of the act astounded the high priest, and so when Belshazzar came to him with the recital of the Ephesian's overthrow by a stranger, an Aramean as inferred by lance and attire, he was convinced that the episodes of the night were part of the danger to Bel of which the stars gave him obscure intimation. This conclusion steadied his mind. He realized that he had many enemies in the state and in the church. The priests of the temples of other cities who stubbornly resisted his policy of centralising worship at Babylon were dangerous. For the officials at whose head stood Arrabi, the Chief of the Chaldeans, who resented his participation in affairs of state, he harboured no fear, though not unmindful of their power. It was within the precincts of the Temple of Bel that his most insidious, and therefore most dangerous, foes were lodged, the former rivals for the chieftaincy which he now held. Nay, not even in his own household, among the followers of his own choosing, was there the blind, unselfish, and unreasoning loyalty he needed. Exposure of the loss of the amulet might ruin him. To preserve secresy he must place

the material witnesses in temporary durance, and he must restore the holy gem to its position on the bosom of the god before the priests made their morning rounds of the altars, performing the customary ceremonies. Belshazzar he could trust, and, confiding to him the seizure of the amulet, he despatched the chamberlain with a litter and a score of soldiers to the spot where Cleon had been left prostrate, and also sent out priests to bring the Jew before him. Latter, Harimtu crossed his mind, and he sent word for her and the servants who were cognisant of the flight of the maiden to repair at once to the temple. While the loose ends of his plans were being gathered together he betook himself to the small observatory in the upper temple for a consultation of the heavens. He left the observatory without having received encouragement and on returning to his room found Belshazzar in attendance.

"What fresh evils have the gods raised, son of Bel?" he gloomily asked.

"The amulet is still lost."

"The stranger searched the body of the Ephesian and took the gem. He was an Aramean thou saidst. Pry into thy memory for some distinguishing device."

"I have done so, my lord, and can find none. He is a mighty man of valour, and the Ephesian was as wax in his hands."

"Where is this Cleon?"

"Here, my lord. He is conscious and for a time was violent."

"And the others?"

"The lady Harimtu and three of her slaves are here. One is Barak, the Jew."

The chamberlain withdrew, and Khar-mes told the doorkeeper to admit Harimtu. The proud woman fell on her knees before the high priest.

"May my lord extend pardon to his slave," she said.

"Rise, my daughter," responded he in a kindly tone. "I hold nothing in my heart against thee. For some sin or remissness the bitter breath of the gods is upon thee."

"Teach me, great priest, what is my sin," she supplicated.

"The reeds of destiny will I consult and ascertain what sacrifices will incline their ears to thee."

"With overflowing fulness will I feed the sanctuaries. I will pour out oil on their courts like water, I will rain oil on their thresholds. I will offer the odours of cedar, the finest of incense, the fatness of wheat. Look down, my lord, upon thy servant who is full of grief."

"Thou art a faithful daughter of the goddess, Harimtu, and she will intercede for thee and accept thy ransom. Now tell me all thou knowest of the disappearance of the virgin. Was she abducted?"

"That is for thy wisdom to judge, son of Nebo."

She then narrated everything about the girl and Barak, concealing nothing except her feelings toward them, strongly advising that the steward be watched rather than tortured. When she concluded Khar-mes said:

"Thus I charge thee, daughter of the slave dealer. The life of the Jew shall be spared for awhile, but he must not be freed. At midday return to me, and I will inform thee of the goddess's will with respect to the penitential sacrifices and propitiatory offerings. It shall be thy duty to bring to me this maiden, who by absence at this time has not only forfeited the privilege of entering the harem of Bel, but her life. The curse of Mamit will be pronounced against her."

Harimtu shuddered and raised a deprecating hand. She herself could not condemn to that fate the girl she had raised.

"It is the will of the gods. She must not be permitted to breed vipers. Has she marks by which she may be identified?"

"None, my lord, save her beauty and her red gold hair. I never marked her."

"Find and bring her to me. Go, my daughter, and send hither thy steward. Torture wrung nothing from thy gatekeeper, and other methods will be tried with

thy steward. I like him not. He is neither good Jew nor good Babylonian."

"May the god who pronounces blessings turn his face to thee. To the heart of her who hast erred thou utterest words of blessing."

She departed and Barak came, with prostration and bowing of the face. He told the story which he had concocted for the occasion.

"Thou art guiltless concerning the abduction of the chosen virgin?" asked Khar-mes in a suave tone.

"I am innocent of the deed, great priest."

"I will put thee under the custody of two priests with power to enter any house in Babylon and seize her wherever found," was Khar-mes's only comment, though he divined that the man before him was lying. Belshazzar, entering at that juncture, was told what was expected of the steward, and Barak withdrew to await further commands.

"The Ephesian declares he was bewitched. Is he to be put to death in the lawful manner?" asked the chamberlain.

"No," slowly answered the high priest. "In recovering the amulet, and as a spy upon Prince Nebuzaradan, he will be useful."

The conference of the two priests was interrupted by a loud noise as of wrangling, which increased in violence until it reached the door of the room in which they sat. Khar-mes sprang to the door with a savage imprecation and threw it open.

"What now, ye hounds!" he fiercely demanded. "Is the holy temple of Bel a hunting ground?"

The priests parted away from a little, dark old priest in soiled and dusty garb who fixed his close set eyes upon the face of the high priest. Khar-mes quailed before them.

"The holy Oracle of Eridu!" he gasped.

The priests were confounded. "We knew not," one

stammered. "He would force his way into thy presence and we held him back."

"It is true, most noble sakkanakku of Babylon," said the newcomer, speaking in the ancient Sumerian tongue, the speech of religion. "And ye all" addressing the priests peremptorily. "Hear ye what the gods have uttered."

Though greatly perturbed, Khar-mes maintained his natural dignity; before his own priests, as before all Babylon, he must maintain it.

"Welcome, Dagon, son of the priest of Ea, welcome, thou chosen of the goddess Nina, to the city and the house of Bel," said he ceremoniously, and, seating himself, he pointed to a chair beside him.

Dagon, the oracle, folded his arms and contemplated Khar-mes with grave, intent scrutiny. The high priest shifted uneasily. He felt that a crisis had arrived and that the oracle held his fate in the hollow of his hand.

"I came not here to reproach thee, great ishshaku ziru," he commenced in a voice which was naturally harsh and grating. "The gods have directed me to come to thy aid. They are not unmindful that Babylon is the eldest son of Eridu, and into the keeping of this holy city they confided the most holy and sacred Amulet of Bel. Where is that Amulet, son of Nebo?"

"Stolen and lost," answered the high priest, bravely meeting the oracle's burning gaze.

The priests uttered exclamations of horror which were stilled by a contemptuous gesture of the oracle.

"False interpreter of the gods and blind shepherd of the people," he said with cutting scorn. "Hadst thou approached the altar pure of heart and clean of body, thou couldst have read clearly the warning of the stars."

"And what did the stars tell thee?" asked Khar-mes.

"They warned me that an impious thief would steal the Amulet of Bel, and that its loss forebode calamity to the Babylonians," answered the fierce old man. "It

was to warn thee, that without sleep did I travel night and day, but the gods, having decreed punishment for thee, willed that I arrive late. Driven on by pride of power and an unholy design to frustrate the will of the gods, thou and thy polluted priesthood art from the orbit of the true gods steadily withdrawing and setting up an impure worship for the pure worship of thy fathers. Ye are provoking divine wrath which will some day bury the city in the ruins of its own palaces and temples."

The oracle spoke in a shrill, chanting tone, and Kharmes saw that the effect of his words on the priests was very deep. "Holy Oracle," said he, "would it not be well to consider by what means we may restore the Amulet? Children of Eridu are we who will gladly come to thee for correction of our ways when the present menace is passed."

This was fuel to the old man's scorn and anger. "So it has ever been when your power is abased, and you are overwhelmed by the torrent of your enemies' arms. To curb you, the gods must periodically pour out fire on all this land and allow mighty enemies to smite ye down like a single reed. The Bel who settled the places of the sun and moon in the sky, the lord of the ghost world, is not the Bel ye bow down to. Babylon was an offspring of Eridu, and you came humbly to father Ea for a guardian deity. He gave his son Merodach, the messenger of the gods, and as Babylon swelled with pride and riches ye exalted Merodach above other gods and enthroned him beside Ana, the creator of the universe, and Ea, the creator of intelligence, and invested him with the attributes of the great god Bel. Aye, even do ye invoke him by the name of the great god."

The oracle's voice rose higher and higher and rang in the ears of his hearers. Khar-mes watched him as a fencer watches the eye of a masterful opponent. It was with difficulty that he controlled his haughty and imperious spirit.

"Nor has the mighty consort of Bel, Beltis the mother of gods, escaped profanation. Because Zarpanit is the consort of Merodach, lo, she is seated on her throne," continued the oracle with unabated vigour. "One by one the gods of our ancient Sumer have been driven out by the gods of the Semitic usurpers, and our blackheads, once the masters of all Accad and Sumer, have become merged with the sons of Shem as the blue waters of the Euphrates are lost in the yellow floods of summer. Even Ana, in one of whose three secret names the eternal mound at Borsippa was constructed, where he confounded the plans and overthrew the secret counsels of the rebels who attempted to ascend to the land of the silver sky, has been driven from his temple by this Semitic Nebo, and his very name changed. Our old Accadian language is corrupted with Semitism, and nothing but the sanctity of our Sumerian tongue has thus far prevented its debasing.

"Nay, more," continued the oracle, seeing that Kharmes meant to interrupt the arraignment. "After your forefathers had filched from the parent gods their divine functions to feed this gorged Babylon at the expense of older and more revered sanctuaries, it remained for thee, Khar-mes, to descend to the infamy of establishing factories at Borsippa, for the making of holy garments, thus endamaging the revenue of our holy Eridu and its peculiar commerce. Where, sakkanakku, is this to end? Is Babylon all and the world nothing? Remember, the fate of those perverts who endeavoured to reach heaven on a mountain of their own making. Where were your gods, Babylon, when Sennacherib thundered at the gates? What does the loss of this Amulet foresay? It is a last warning from the great gods, and Bel has taken his flight from a place wherein daily he witnesses the exaltation of an inferior. Beware the anger of the gods of the land, ye stiffnecked children of pride!"

Weak from want of sleep and food, and racked by the vehemence of his passion, the old man wavered where

he stood and would have fallen, had not Belshazzar caught him as he staggered.

"Peace, holy one," said Khar-mes. "We have considered this matter before. Babylon, as thou knowest, gives most heavily to the holy and revered temple and shrine of Eridu."

"True, true," said the oracle, putting aside the supporting arms of the chamberlain, "and for that one evidence of enduring fealty I will pray the gods to stay their anger and restore the Amulet. For your transgressions there must be sacrifice and atonement."

"It shall be done as thou dost command. But by midday every Babylonian will be aware that the Amulet is gone. The cause of its absence they must not learn, nor must that knowledge go beyond this room."

The oracle aroused himself again and faced the gaping priests. "In my hands" said he impressively, gazing into the eyes of each, one after another as he spoke, "in my hands the goddess Mamit has reposed the reed of doom, and I hurl the curse which neither gods nor men can undo, the sabba from which there is no escape. I forbid ye on pain of the consuming curse, the curse that extends beyond death, to speak of the Amulet of Bel or to think of it except as your great ishshaku ziru directs."

The priests huddled closer together. As they threatened the people, so this man threatened them.

"This much, Khar-mes, for the gods" he added, resuming the high-pitched tone of voice. "I leave thee to work in thine own way for the recovery of the sacred Amulet."

"Stay, most holy oracle," said the high priest, stepping forward to stop him. "Without thy keen vision we are helpless."

"Burn incense to your Nebo," answered Dagon with returning anger. "Another behest of the gods have I to perform. It may be I shall find the stone by a light our ancient gods will vouchsafe me."

"The people—what shall we tell the people?" persisted Khar-mes, taking hold of the oracle's shaggy goatskin cloak.

"Tell them," replied he, in his shrill prophetic voice, at the same time unloosening the cloak from his shoulders, and leaving it in the grasp of the high priest, "tell them that the god whom thou callest Bel has covered himself with the cloak of prophecy and will not appear uncovered to his people until Nineveh has fallen. I go to Nineveh, where points my star."

With these words the aged oracle walked, erect and firm, out of the presence of the dumb priests. Khar-mes was the first to recover from the effect of his voice and words. Beckoning to Belshazzar he whispered:

"Follow him."

Chapter XIV

AT THE FORD OF THE RISING SUN

OMAR, the merchant, Talmai, the Nabathean, and the maiden arrived in safety, after a brisk ride upon their camels, at the house of the Egibi near the Ford of the Rising Sun, immediately north of the outer wall of Babylon. Early the following morning the young man left his couch, and, finding a pool fed by a fountain in the court of the men's quarter, he refreshed his body and went forth into the garden. He strolled down cool walks, under blossoming fruit trees that were still humid with dew, and came to an embankment overlooking the Euphrates river, where he saw a servant whom he recognised as the porter who had admitted them the night before. The honest fellow, fishing line in hand, sat upon the embankment, his feet dangling over, and beside him on the stone coping a wicker basket half full of carp and barbel. When he saw the young man he scrambled to his feet and bowed subserviently.

"May the Sun-god of fifty faces shine upon thee," said the porter, whose name was Sapin.

"May thy heart rest," responded Talmai.

"Thou seest this house at its poorest, friend of my master. The servants, except myself and old Nubta, the housekeeper, whose days of visiting the groves are past, went to the feast of the prince last evening. This place is occupied by our master only in the hot months, and our larder is low. Therefore these wrigglers may be good things to satisfy the mouth."

"Truly," answered Talmai, with a pleasant smile, "to a man of the desert they are the good of the land."

"The desert?" responded Sapin, at once interested,

for the desert in the mind of the townsman was a vague region of fiery reptiles, scorpions plentiful as grasshoppers, and other strange and fearsome monsters.

"Then they will give delight unto the stomach as these resplendent waters give delight to the eyes. All my life have I lived on the banks of this mighty river, have watched it rise and flood the land, and have seen it waste until a horse could ford it. From the blue of the sky above have I seen it change to the bronze of old Nubta's cooking pots, and from the pink of a maiden's cheek to the yellow of old Nubta's neck. Daily I sacrifice to the god of the river. But here are fishes enough." And the porter picked up the basket and hurried to the kitchen.

Talmai leisurely made his way to the house, breathing in the cense of morning. He was joined by Omar who, seeing the Nabathean for the first time by daylight, scanned him closely. He beheld a young man of twenty-three or twenty-four years, of noble mien and graceful carriage. A pair of sparkling eyes that could flash with the fire of battle or melt with a tale of love were overhung by black eyebrows which looked like jet in contrast with his light, clear, olive complexion. In person he was of just stature and perfect proportions, spare in flesh, but knit together for large deeds.

On the other hand Talmai saw before him an elderly man of benign appearance, comely in countenance, bearing an aspect of gravity and dignity mixed with a certain humorous shrewdness, perceptible only in familiar intercourse. His hair was worn in the Babylonian style of long and carefully curled ringlets, and his full grey beard flowed down upon his breast. It was streaked with lines of white, but in his eye and firm step were no evidences of age. His voice was that of one habituated to command, yet of a pleasing quality.

"The night is past, my lord of the sands," said he to the Nabathean after greetings. "Does morning bring aught of regret for this borrowing of trouble?"

"None, noble sir."

"It is well. Now we turn neither to the right nor to left, though, by my friendship for thy father, I would thou wert out of it. Albeit I have not seen thee since thy childhood, the rumor of thy fame is abroad. Thou couldst not be thy father's son and be of a fearful heart. Haste requires me to ask why thou art come to the great city. Power and wealth have I, and they are thine, for by the oath of blood brotherhood thou art my son."

The tone more than the words affected Talmai.

"My father loves thee," he replied with feeling, "and sent me, his only living son, committed to thy guidance."

The merchant beckoned to a nearby stone bench, and they seated themselves.

"I knew thy father when young and strong like thyself. The prince of Edom was he, and in due time he ascended the throne of his fathers, and was king and ever a hero whose heart led him to the fray. When the yoke of the Assyrian lay heavy upon his land he joined the great confederacy that ended when Shamas Shumukin, the brother of Assurbanipal and viceroy of Babylon, set fire to his own palace and perished in the flames rather than trust in the mercy of his royal brother. Thy father's peculiar potency with the tribes and kings of Arabia and Syria was a thing to be considered, and he was pardoned but exiled to Ardiban on the Khabour and there kept as an hostage. There, son of Mathan, wert thou born, and there has he remained ever since, broken in spirit and supported by the loving faithfulness of his scattered tribesmen. Have I spoken truth?"

"Thy words are words of truth. Thou mightst add that it has come to our ears that the Babylonian governor took bribes from the Assyrians to prevent us from joining the league against Nineveh, and that my father sent me hither to counsel with thee before I approach King Nabopalassar."

"Thou didst meet me in good time. I had left my house and, after a visit to the warehouse, had started

for Nineveh in the cool of the evening, when I came upon thee spitting a man in the street and wofully involving thyself with a kinsman of the king, the great high priest and the most powerful woman in Babylonia. Hah! But tell me of thyself. Art thou taught?"

"In arms, all that could be learned in the schools of the Nairi and Damascus and put in practice against wild beasts and wilder men. In the history of my people, all that my father has deemed it wise to impart. In books—enough for all needs. My hope is to restore the fortunes of my house and the decayed estate of my people."

"What men armed for war canst thou muster?"

Talmai's face saddened. "Our people have been thinned and scattered, and I can promise no more than three thousand lances. Others may join, yet I can promise but three thousand."

They arose and walked on through the bowered paths, silent, thoughtful.

"It is of no certainty that thou shouldest cast thy lot with Babylon," at last spoke the merchant. "What of last night? This girl whom we abducted claims to be a Jewess, and my heart tells me that whatever she says is truth. A myrtle, says the wise man, even in the desert remains a myrtle. I, a Jew, cannot leave her to her enemies. We know not how diligently Khar-mes will seek this young woman, nor how narrowly Nebuzaradan will inquire into the death or wounding of the soldier who wore the plaid of his clan. My counsel is to proceed to Nineveh and watch the turn of events."

"I am in thy hands."

"Then let us eat—for what says the Smyrnan? 'There is nothing more important than a hungry stomach, which will not allow a man to forget it, whatever be his cares and sorrows.' Nubta! Nubta! We will breakfast here under the blossoms."

Nubta brought small lacquered tables, chairs, ewers for the hands, and perfumed napkins, after which she served a light repast under spreading almond trees by

the side of a fountain which discharged its water by a lion's mouth into a great basin. Omar asked the old woman if her charge was up and about.

"She waits thy orders, my master."

"Bid her come hither."

"She said she was a bondwoman," said Talmai.

"I have been a slave myself, and princes and kings have been slaves and may be slaves again. She has not the short cut hair of a slave, and neither has she the heart of a slave."

Talmai had a delicious memory of the long ride of the night before. She had fainted and would have fallen from the camel had not he caught her, and he was compelled to carry her in his arms until they came to the house of Egibi. The odour of her fragrant hair lingered with him.

When the young girl appeared the men exchanged a wondering glance of surprise at her exquisite beauty. Omar noted that it was of a delicate, aristocratic type, while Talmai was affected by the pathetic expression in her eyes.

"The peace of the morning to thee, daughter" said Omar. Taking her hands in his, he led her to the table, where Talmai had set a chair for her.

"Your kindness is great" she murmured.

Though urged to eat, she was but a poor table companion. Conversation touched any subject except the causes that brought the three together, a matter politely left for her to broach. She was of a thoughtful, introspective nature, but by no means disposed to melancholy, and the cheerfulness of the older man was wholesome and contagious.

"There is a proverb of our people" said he to the Jewess, alluding to her abstemiousness, "which says 'Eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart.'"

"Our people?" she repeated vaguely, "I am a Judean."

"It is as a Jew that I speak. We are partakers of the same law."

She looked at him with joyful surprise, then at his companion.

"Thou, too, must be a Judean?" she asked of Talmai.

"I am a Nabathean," he answered.

"Which means he is our cousin," interposed Omar, observing her expression of disappointment.

Nubta, coming up to remove the remnants of the repast, there was silence for a while. After they had cleansed their hands and been sprinkled by her with rose-water infused with musk, the old servant withdrew.

"I must tell thee," the Jewess continued, resuming their conversation, "I have no evidence of being a Judean further than the word of Barak, my lady's steward."

"I know him," responded Omar sourly.

The Nabathean perceived that a moment for confidence between Omar and his ward had arrived, and quietly withdrew.

Unreservedly she told all she knew about her past, which was a scanty recital. Probe as he would, the merchant could make nothing of it except a commonplace story of the capture of the child of wealthy parents by a marauding band, her absorption into the household of the daughter of a slave dealer, where she grew into the favour of the mistress, her subsequent training for some rich man's harem, and confiscation by Khar-mes.

"Dost remember nothing more of thy father's home than slaves, a large garden like this, and rough men seizing thee and carrying thee a long distance?" he asked.

"A dim remembrance have I of one who must have been my mother. It is of a sick woman I was taken to see."

"Canst recall aught of her—aught of eyes, or hair?"

The maiden leaned forward, elbow on knee and chin in hand and gazed long and earnestly into the water of

the basin, conjuring in its clear depths memories of a darkened room and a pale-faced woman propped up among cushions.

"Think. Think hard" urged Omar, scanning her profile intently.

She shook her head. "It is in vain," she answered, apologetically. "I was very young."

"Scenes of violence and the breaking up of homes carry the memory further back into childhood than the tender impressions. Was thy mother's hair like thine?"

"No, no, I am sure not. Why sure, I cannot say, nor can I say the colour, yet am I sure it was not like mine."

"The nurse—what of her?"

"The servants of that time mingle in my mind with the servants of Harimtu. My mistress knows only that I came to Babylon with other captives sent by her father from Malatiyeh in the land of the Moschi."

"The similarity between thy father's house and the house of Harimtu as it is known to thee partly explains the commingling of servants."

"As known to me? Why, I know every nook and corner of it—that is, of the woman's quarters. I was never in the men's quarters."

Omar felt relieved. The girl was ignorant of the source of Harimtu's wealth. "And is all memory of thy father forgotten?"

"All remembrance of my father is blotted out. The only man I remember was a priest, and it is what I recall of his dress that made Barak believe I am Jew born. It puts me to shame," she added with sudden energy, "that memory of my father and mother is forgotten, while the priest stands forth like a thing apart."

"Tell me, I pray thee, what is thy feeling toward this Barak."

"Friend has he been since my childhood."

"I deem it best for thy safety to move beyond the immediate reach of Khar-mes. When that is done Barak

can be notified of thy whereabouts, and thou mayst go to him, if it is thy will."

The young girl started to say something and stopped in embarrassment.

Omar waited.

"Of his kindness am I not unmindful, but—" she went on softly yet with determination. "My wish is to remain with thee."

"No child have I and to me thou shalt be one until we ascertain thy parentage. In time will I obtain thy freedom from Harimtu."

The girl seized his hand and fervently kissed it.

"This name—Shaghulla—is too Babylonish, and, as it is my intent to adopt thee if we fail to find thy family—"

"Oh!" she exclaimed joyfully.

"Yes" continued Omar smiling with her. "As my daughter I shall give thee another name."

"What shall it be?" she asked, with undisguised curiosity.

"Canst remember how thou wert called before thy captivity?"

"Many times have I tried to recollect it, and many Jewish names has Barak called off to aid my memory, and always in vain."

"Didst ever hear the name Sherah?" asked Omar with impressiveness.

"Sherah, Sherah," she mused. "Was that one of those Barak repeated?"

"Many daughters of Ephraim have borne it. Therefore, my daughter," continued Omar solemnly, "I name thee Sherah."

The young woman's face became pale with emotion. Sinking to her knees she exclaimed: "So be it, my father," and, burying her face in the old man's robe, she burst into tears. Omar was intensely affected. In this position Talmai, coming down a blossom-covered alley, beheld them.

"Come hither, son of Mathan," Omar called out.

Talmai advanced to where they were.

The newly-baptised Sherah arose and stood before them in an attitude of respect.

"This, son of my brother," Omar announced, "is my adopted daughter, Sherah. Shaghulla, the bondwoman of Harimtu exists no more."

Chapter XV

THE PRIEST ON THE WHITE MULE

LEAVING word that Jehu be sent to him immediately on his arrival, the merchant went into the house, whose creamy walls of tinted stucco gleamed invitingly through the trees.

Talmai and Sherah were soon on the friendliest of terms. She frankly told him that she found this garden of the celebrated Egibi not so well kept, but more beautiful than the garden of the lady Harimtu, and Talmai said the place was not so well kept, probably, because its owners were there rarely, and that it appeared to be more beautiful to her because she had acquired a father there.

"Of a surety—I suppose—" said Sherah tentatively, "my father" (the term sounded strange in her ears) "will tell me of my new family, yet—" and she wrinkled her forehead prettily—"there is a thing I would now know, and from thee."

Talmai's face lengthened.

"Yes, I should wait and keep silence," she continued, with a merry laugh, divining his objection, "but I intend not to wait. What, I pray thee, is our kinship? Is it near?"

She emphasized the word "our" and his face relaxed.

"Forgive me if I seem churlish," said he, "or rude in speech. Young companions I have never had."

Sherah glanced curiously at this grave young man whose habiliment, though once rich, was now weather-worn. Her life had been all brightness and light until yesterday—and how long ago that yesterday!

"Let my words pass, my lord," she said penitently.

"Willingly will I answer thy question, as far as it

concerns myself. My father and Omar are blood-brothers and thou art a very distant cousin of——"

"And of whom am I a very distant cousin?" she interrupted.

"Of Talmai, son of Mathan."

Sherah was balked in her inquiry by the matter of fact answer. "As though the son of Mathan were known of all," she thought. So she tried another course to gain the information she was seeking.

"Let my ignorance plead for me, my lord, when I ask thee what is blood-brothership? I have been apart from the world all my life, and knowledge is not my kinswoman."

"It is the brotherhood brought about by mutual danger successfully endured, when men hazard freely their lives for one another. With the hatred of envy the younger son may hate the oldest son of his father for his birthright, and with the hatred of jealousy the older son may hate the younger son for his beauty and daring, but between brothers united by the blood bond there can by no envy, jealousy, or hatred."

Sherah was ashamed to press her inquisition further, and as a palliation for her curiosity told Talmai of her own simple life behind the high walls of her former Babylonian home. Chatting thus, they came to a concave sun-dial where there was a high-backed stone bench, and they sat down to watch the shadows shorten upon the timepiece.

"In thy sight must these things be small," she remarked. "To men, have I heard, are given the great cares of life, and weighty matters of business and the affairs of the king must consume thy time."

"No-o, with my horse and my dog I hunt——"

He stopped abruptly and smote his forehead.

"Martha!" he exclaimed reproachfully, "I had forgotten thee."

The young woman was startled by the vehemence of his words and action. She grew uneasy, frigid.

"Martha?" she repeated distantly.

"Yes, Martha," he replied with an expression of remorse. "My horse."

"Oh!"

Their conversation was interrupted by the merchant, who walked briskly to where they sat, followed by Jehu. A curious expression came into Omar's face when he saw the two young people sitting together in amiable proximity. "Truly," he thought, "the sage has it right. The world is a wedding."

"Let us counsel together, son of Mathan," he announced. "Stay," he added to Sherah, who rose to leave them. "Jehu, my faithful friend and servant, this is thy mistress, the lady Sherah. Obey her."

Jehu bent his knees and raised the hem of her robe to his lips. He was a man somewhat beyond middle age, of bronzed complexion and seamed face, with bright intelligent eyes. The Aramean decided without hesitation that he could be trusted. The three sat on the bench, and the servant stood before them.

"Jehu heard nothing with regard to the disappearance of Sherah, but thinks he was followed by a priest," said Omar without preliminary. "Relate again what befell thee after we separated, Jehu."

"May my lord turn his face to his servant. On arriving at my lord's house in Babylon, I found it forsaken of servants, who had hurried to the temple grounds after my lord's departure," commenced Jehu. "The articles which would have betrayed the son of Mathan I destroyed, and the mare I put in a secure place. But in the night I dreamed a dream, that thieves were breaking in to steal the peerless one, and I awoke and hastened with her to my lord's stables in Hillat, where I left her in the hands of Ardiya, the superintendent, to be delivered to no one except he show a written order from my master. There I deemed her safest while our fate is in the balance."

"I thank thee," interposed Talmai. "This day will I reclaim her."

"A closed cart from the stables I took on the chance that haply it might be of use to my lady Sherah. My way back from Hillat was along the Avenue of the Temple, which was thick with revellers coming forth from the rites of the goddess Zarpanit. Men and women were stirred up by a miracle done that night by Bel, though their accounts agreed not together. Some said they saw a great and dazzling light in the Upper Temple at the midhour of night. Others swore that not only was the light to be seen but that a loud voice uttered dark sayings, and there were a few who averred they heard the rustle of cherubim wings. The priests, on going their accustomed rounds at break of day to pour libations and wipe the dust from the faces of the graven images, found on the golden statue of Bel in the Upper Temple a prophet's cloak. Khar-mes, the great high priest, on beholding the cloak, ordered that no one touch it, not even to brush off the dust," and Jehu smiled grimly.

"Then, as I learned, Khar-mes visited the shrine of destiny, and when he came forth he announced that, as a recompense for his own piety and devotion, the gods had vouchsafed an explanation of the miracle. This was, that the cloak had descended from the heavens in a chariot of fire shortly after midnight and had been placed by unseen hands around the form of the sitting god, where it must remain until the fall of Nineveh. The high priest then called before him the woman in the upper sanctuary, and in answer to his questions she declared in the presence of the people that she had been blinded by a great light shortly after midnight. On partly recovering from the terror of the vision, though the light was still dazzling, she saw a chariot of fire and heard mystical words spoken in a loud voice."

Jehu paused.

"Shall I go on, my master?" he asked.

"Let us hear all," replied the merchant. "I wonder at the craft of this priest. He is the ablest ishshaku-ziru that ever ruled Babylon, yet it is by the most odious works of

trickery and wicked sacrifices that he maintains his power over the people. I know not how it is with thee, son of Mathan. Long ago thy father abandoned the worship of stocks and stones and put his entire faith in the God of Israel."

"Him I too worship," replied the Nabathean.

"It is well. Proceed Jehu."

"I lingered about the temple to hear aught that might affect thee, my master, but there was no talk except of this miracle. At the Cutha gate of the city an old priest asked permission to ride in the cart. Willingly I complied, for have I not seen thee, my master, dismount and lend thy horse to a weary traveller? Not very far from the city I took note of a man riding behind us on a white Susianian mule. The turns I took he took, and, fearing he was a spy, I whipped the horse to a run and, leaving the main road, sought obscure byways and lanes bordered with thick acacias. Yet ever and anon the white mule trotted into sight somewhere behind.

"When we passed the bridge over the Royal canal, at a place where the road branches abruptly to the left and to the right, the priest alighted and went on down the way which pointed to the north. I turned sharply to the west, skirted the canal to the Sippara road and gradually worked westward toward the Ford of the Rising Sun. Believing I had lost my pursuer, I drove boldly to the gate here. Behold, within sight was the white mule and its rider approaching from the way I had come. I waited till he passed, my lord; he wore the embroidered robes of a priest of high rank."

Jehu ceased and stood expectant. Talmai and Sherah looked at Omar.

"What thinkest thou, son of Mathan?" the merchant asked.

The young man made a deprecatory gesture, as though to say he would listen to his elder before venturing an opinion.

"If Jehu was followed with purpose of heart," said

Omar, "we need not inquire wherefore, lest hesitation be our undoing. There are three courses open to us. One is to return to Babylon, place Sherah under the protection of Kabtiya, the chief of the Egibi, and defy Kharmes. That would bring on a contest between the house of Egibi and the high priest that could only terminate after a long struggle, during which Sherah's life would ever be in jeopardy. The second course is to stay here and submit to arrest, a thing not to be thought of. The third is to go quickly to Nineveh behind whose walls we would rest secure while my kinsmen pacified Khar-mes."

"My father," broke in Sherah, "thou shalt not endanger thyself for my sake. I will give myself up to this priest and then kill myself."

"Nay, nay, that shall not be," said Omar determinedly. Talmai bowed approval of his words.

"I am not worth the cost, and I protest," she insisted.

"Then will we take thee prisoner," and, thus dismissing her objections, he asked the Nabathean to give his advice.

"This I suggest," replied Talmai: "First, have old Nubta put on the lady Sherah's garments, veil herself, enter the cart, and let this priest or his men see her enter it. If the priest is seeking Sherah, deceived by the garb, he will follow the cart, which Jehu or Sapin can drive to Babylon. I will in equally open manner depart for Hillat to recover my horse and later join thee on the road to Nineveh."

"The remainder of thy plan, I perceive, is for Sherah and myself to slip out by a side gate after thou art gone, and make speed and hasten to Nineveh?"

"As thou sayest."

"So be it, son of Mathan. At Hillat it can be arranged for thee to come to the camp before Nineveh with one of our regular caravans. Ardiya will supply thee with money."

"I have a note of credit from my father," said Talmai.

"It is not well to use it now. Thou hast the credit of the Egibi."

Talmai thrust his hand into the bosom of his robe and with the note from his father drew forth the sparkling gem dropped by the Ephesian in the encounter of the night previous. It had remained forgotten and undisturbed in the pocket of his robe. Omar took the stone from the outstretched hand and examined it critically.

"It is of price beyond estimation, though but partly polished," said he. "To the rightful owner must it be restored. Here is an inscription, but in such minute characters that a magnifying lens must be used to read it. Here, too, is a fracture with a sapphire tint on the edge."

"In size, shape and lustre," said Talmai, "it much resembles a stone in my father's possession. But his is a sapphire."

"Leave it in my keeping for the present, son of Mathan. That sword of thine to the enemies might betray thee."

"It is my father's sword." Then, ashamed of his hesitation, he pulled it from his girdle and laid it in Omar's hand. "Thou art my father's brother," he added simply, and he also placed the two daggers he wore alongside the sword.

"Keep one dagger until thou canst fully arm thyself in Hillat."

Jehu appeared.

"The camels are ready, my lord."

"Bestow these weapons among the packs. Go, my daughter, and clothe Nubta in thy robes. Garments will she find for thee."

Sherah and Jehu hastened away, and the merchant and the Nabathean went into the house.

"Son of Mathan," said Omar, "use my money and name as freely as once I used thy father's, and let not the salt of charity be wanting to the money. I shall take the western road to avoid delays from Prince Nebuchadnezzar's party. If thou dost not overtake us, go thou to the scribe of the prince in the Babylonian camp and in my name apply for a passport through the besieging

lines. If I am not there I will be in Nineveh, and on watch for thee at the southern gate."

Sherah entered, attired for travel. Jehu also came forward and announced that Sapin and Nubta had departed.

"The time of parting is at hand," said Omar. "Before the third kasbu of the night must we reach the Tigris. May the God of heaven give thee a prosperous journey, son of Mathan."

"Let it be well with thee, son of Egibi. Farewell, my cousin Sherah."

The merchant bowed gravely and Sherah pulled her veil over her face. Both were too deeply moved for words, and the Nabathean disappeared before they recovered speech.

"Come my daughter," said Omar to the young woman. "Come."

"My father," said she, "after all, might it not have been the old priest whom the man on the white mule was following?"

Chapter XVI

THE HAND OF KHAR-MES DESCENDS

THE inn known as the Seven Doors of the Earth, in the profane city of Hillat, the southern suburb of Babylon, where the foreigners dwelt, was a lively resort during festival times. In Hillat foreign gods were permitted sanctuary, for Babylon was too truly a city of merchants and traffic to forbid worship of gods other than those of the land; but incense must not rise to them nor sacrifice be offered in the holy city of Bel, Dintir-ki, the old sacred city walled by the ancient wall within the wall named Imgur-Bel. Hence Hillat, with its narrow, dirty streets and the smells of all nations, flourished in the shadow of Imperial Babylon.

Talmai sat at the door of a room opening upon the courtyard of this inn and watched the stirring scene before him, a scene riotous with action and life, with noise and clamour, and always colour; colour everywhere and in everything, in robes, and harness, and equipment, in bales, and tent, and walls, in all animate and inanimate things, brilliant, glowing, omnipresent.

The inn was more court than cover, being a square of shallow rooms built around a spacious yard. The only opening in the rooms faced this great enclosure, in which the tents of resting pilgrims and merchants thickly clustered. Dogs prowled in search of food, camels crouched and chewed their cuds, erratic donkeys blundered about smouldering fires and stumbled over tent ropes. Caravans came and went, men and boys frantically drove animals hither and thither, and as fast as a magazine was stripped of the goods of the departing guest it was filled with the goods of the guest who had just arrived.

Talmai's meditations were interrupted by a noisy altercation beyond some intervening tents which hid the brawlers from his view. A company of gayly caparisoned horsemen carrying lances from which fluttered the token of their tribe, had ridden into the already crowded court and, finding no available space, peremptorily called for the innkeeper. That individual thought to hold back until their impatience lessened and sent a servant, a young lad, to conciliate and temporise. The boy had just returned from an errand and bore a bundle under his arm.

"What!" exclaimed the leader of the newcomers, a tall dark man with grizzled hair, "are we to be put off by a servant?" Jumping from his horse with a leather halter in his hand he brought the thong down violently on the shrinking lad. The boy staggered back in terror, but the leader followed him up, oaths and stripes answering sobs and implorings. The innkeeper vanished to await the passing of the storm, and the loungers about the place remained at a respectful distance from the irate man and his followers. As the two active participants in the scene came into view from behind the tents, the boy stumbled, and fell, and set up a piteous wail.

Talmai sprang out and grasped the upraised arm. Instantly the mounted men urged their horses forward, lances poised.

"My lord Talmai!" the leader ejaculated, and the others bounded from their horses to do homage.

The Nabathean by a gesture commanded silence. "Thou art not now in thy land of Gambalia, noble Urman," he said to the leader. "Let not thy tongue know the son of Mathan is here."

"It shall cleave to my jaws."

The boy timidly pulled Talmai by the robe. "Here is that for which thou didst send," he said, raising a tear-stained, but grateful face.

"Put the package in the room, boy." Then to the Gambalian: "This lad serves me while here."

"Far was it from my intent to strike the servant of

"THOU ART NOT NOW IN THY LAND OF GAMBALIA, NOBLE URMAN."—*Page 118.*

my lord, the son of our king. I believed I was punishing the insolence of a Babylonian, which is to me sweeter than running water, or fruit and wine."

The boy again pulled Talmai by the sleeve.

"What wilt thou, lad?" asked the Nabathean kindly.

"May my lord hearken to me," the boy answered in a low voice. "I have something for thine ear alone."

Talmai motioned the chief to precede him.

"There is a watch set over thee," whispered the lad. "Trust not the keeper of the inn."

Then he passed quickly on to the room and deposited the bundle. Talmai and Urman stepped in after him, and the Nabathean closed the heavy poplar wood door, in which there was a grated opening near the top for light and air. The boy glanced apprehensively at Urman and edged nearer his protector.

"Fear not," Talmai assured him. "What is it thou hast to tell me? Thou mayst speak openly."

"I know no more, my lord. The order was given me secretly when I returned just now. A priest was with my master at the time." With this he hastened away.

The Nabathean noted the youth curiously as they conversed. Before the warning he was no more in his sight than an ordinary dirty-faced, unkempt, carelessly attired lad of an inn; now he observed a pair of large, intelligent gray eyes, and a delicately moulded and graceful form, which it was impossible for the short coarse tunic to vulgarise. The whiteness of the skin and an unaccustomed mixture of Aramean and Babylonian words proclaimed him to be of foreign birth—Median, Bactrian, Skythian, Lydian, Cilikian, Ionian? Talmai did not pause to consider.

"The face of my lord is refreshment to my bones," said Urman. "The more refreshing because unexpected."

"One hour in Babylon, my friend, has raised powerful enemies who have me in a snare——"

"It will not be the first snare we have been in together."

"But for this," Talmai remarked with a contemptuous smile as he opened the package and disclosed a fringed and elegantly embroidered Babylonian robe, "I would be out of the snare. It was necessary that I come here in this gown," indicating Jehu's garment, "but not deeming it seemly to present myself thus before the friend of Omar of the Egibi I sent the boy to the furnishers for a robe. By stealth must I leave, but I go not without my horse."

"Martha is here?"

"At the Egibi stables."

"I know the place. The business which brought me to Babylon can wait. Assuredly is the pride of the desert not to be given over to strangers."

"Remain thou here for the present while I go to the stables of the Egibi. The lad will conduct me. Secure quarters as if for a stay of days and learn what thou canst of the intentions of our enemies. What number of men hast thou?"

"There are six of us, all ready to die for thee."

"Brave and faithful Urman, thy devotion to our house never can be repaid."

Urman made answer by kissing Talmai's hand and lifting it above his head, signifying that his life and his fortunes were at the disposal of the son of Mathan.

Summoning the youth, Talmai left the court.

"How art thou called, my lad, and what is thy condition—bond or free?" he asked after they had proceeded some distance.

"Itti-Bel am I called here, though far from being 'With Bel.' A slave of ransom am I, from Ionia."

"Thy price?"

"Thirty-five shekels my master paid for me, though I do appraise myself higher. Certain it is I would fetch more in Ionia."

The lad smiled so quaintly that Talmai smiled in return.

"Wouldst change masters?"

"I am going to change masters," responded the youth with a sparkle of mirth in his eyes.

They arrived at the immense stables of the Egibi, a series of courtyards, large and small, the four sides of which were composed of sheds for animals, magazines for grain and store-rooms for chariots and carriages. This was the city headquarters for the camels, mules, horses and donkeys that were used by the firm in its enormous caravan traffic. Ardiya, the superintendent, lived in a house near by and, on reading the letter presented by Talmai, overwhelmed him with proffers of courtesies which the young man skillfully curtailed. Talmai drew as much gold in bars as was convenient to carry and, ordering the mare sent to the Inn of the Seven Doors, departed in search of an armorer.

"Take thou this, Itti-Bel," he remarked on the way. "'Tis enough to buy thy freedom."

He handed the lad two maneh.

The youth stared in amazement at such munificence. "'Tis far more than my life is worth," he murmured, with a touch of sadness, as he fingered the gold pieces.

"Have we been followed?"

"Every step, my lord. They trust me not."

"By a richly robed priest?"

"Not so. By a man who wears the red cap of the brickmakers' guild."

"Listen, Itti-Bel. If I am captured tell Urman, the Gambalian chief, who beat thee, to deliver unto my father the mare Martha. Give also to the chief a maneh to purchase thy freedom and restore thee to thy people."

"I hear my lord, but, Zeus willing, thou wilt not be captured."

Talmai thought to send a message to Sherah and Omar, but, knowing they would understand if he remained absent, he refrained.

They came to the street of the armorers, and Talmai entered a shop to make his purchases. An idea of evad-

ing the spy on his heels was dissipated by the entrance after him of a man wearing the distinctive red cap of the brickmakers' guild.

"The spy," whispered Itti-Bel.

Talmai looked squarely at the fellow, who obviously was not a brickmaker.

"Come hither, son of nobody," he harshly commanded, addressing the newcomer.

The man flushed at the insult.

"Hold thou the door, Itti-Bel," Talmai ordered.

The youth darted by the stranger who stood unmoved gazing earnestly at the man who had so unexpectedly addressed him.

The dealer in weapons stepped forward to seek an explanation. "Noble sir," said he to Talmai, "I am a free Babylonian merchant and under the protection of the king. If thou hast dispute with this workman, the house of the judge is not far distant."

The stranger advanced and said with a show of dignity: "There need be no disturbance, if a word I may drop in this man's ear."

The Nabathean nodded to the merchant, who retreated out of hearing.

"Thou art bold for one of thy class," he contemptuously addressed the spy.

"No more a brickmaker am I than thou a Babylonian, yet am I willing thou shouldst go free."

Talmai said nothing.

"The Aramean art thou who last night didst abduct the bondwoman of Harimtu, the daughter of the slave dealer, in defiance of the church of Babylon."

Talmai gazing coldly at the stranger made no response.

"It is Barak, the steward of the lady Harimtu who addresses thee. Why thou didst steal the girl I know not, but I know thou never hadst met her before last night."

The Nabathean's silence discomfited the steward.

"A Judean am I, and, she being a Judean, I wish to save her from priestly concubinage. Tell me where she

is and tell not the priests, and I promise the friendly services of Kabtiya, the chief of the Egibi, in thy behalf."

Talmai now saw, or thought he saw, why he had been followed and spied upon rather than arrested at once. It was knowledge of the whereabouts of the missing Bride of Bel that was more desired than his punishment. That could follow. His enemies had no fear of his escaping their meshes..

"How know I it is her wish to have thee find her?" he asked.

"Ah," responded Barak. "It is I alone to whom she looks for protection or succour. Her soul chooseth death rather than the harem of Bel."

"Would her honour be safer with thee than with the priests?"

Barak suppressed his own impatience, his anger and bitter resentment, but the swollen veins in his forehead indicated his deep earnestness.

"O Aaron and Joshua, son of Nun!" he cried, "grant me patience. I tell thee, Aramean, I would yield my life for this girl who has grown up before me as a tender plant. Yes," he burst forth, "I loved her and sought her out from her youth; I desired to make her my wife, and I was a lover of her beauty."

Talmai was astonished at the transformation in the Judean's bearing as he uttered this declaration. The flickering remnants of the nobility of his race blazed into full life, and for the moment eclipsed the meanness of his garb and the impress of years of servitude. As he gazed, however, he saw the sordid lines resume their place in Barak's face.

"I can tell thee nothing. Let this brickmaker out," he added to Itti-Bel.

The eyes of Barak lit up with baleful wrath.

"Better for thee the executioner's sword than this defiance," he snarled. Talmai turned his back. Barak walked to the door and passed out.

"A man not to be trusted my lord."

The remark was so mature that Talmai noted its inappropriateness as coming from a lad of Itti-Bel's years. The boy's face flushed under his keen gaze.

"Pardon my boldness of speech," he muttered.

Talmai called forward the dealer in weapons. He wanted the best and broke the first two or three swords given him for trial. He was ambidextrous, and his skill and strength with either arm amazed the armourer.

"These weapons were not made for Gisdhubar," finally expostulated the alarmed merchant. Talmai mollified him by paying for the broken ones and in a new lot submitted found two that withstood his tests. One was of the extreme length of the older pattern, extraordinarily heavy, straight, two-edged, so exquisitely tempered that it could be bent and manipulated in an astonishing manner, and so sharp that it would cut a hair or cleave armour. It was suspended by a plain cross-hilt from a cross-belt passing over the shoulder and chest. The second sword was short, straight, heavy, two-edged, and was worn in the waist belt along with the customary two daggers.

Next he bought, and put on beneath his tunic, a shirt of mail of fine iron scales embossed with copper, and then selected two straight-handled, double edged daggers, very richly chased with rosettes and chevrons.

"If thou dost meet my father, Itti-Bel," he said, while the merchant was busy elsewhere, "show him this as a token that thou comest from me." He gave the lad his gold-handled dagger, which bore on its sheath a copy of his personal seal, a dismounted hunter meeting the charge of a lion, his horse standing behind him.

The youth affectionately kissed the hand extended to him. "I have the heart of a partridge," said he, carefully bestowing the weapon in the folds of his tunic, "but thoughts of thee will inspire me to plunge this into the bosom of the next man who strikes me."

"Well said, my lad. Though thou hast the slave cut of hair, be not a slave at heart."

Talmai's next purchase was a long lance, the Aramean

horseman's favourite weapon of attack. After that he bought a light steel helmet covered with embossed and figured leather which made it appear like the ordinary skull cap worn by citizens.

Having armed himself, the Nabathean returned to the inn, where he talked the situation over with Urman, the Gambalian, who characteristically made light of the danger and difficulty of extrication.

"I fear nothing when with thee son of Mathan," he remarked significantly.

"I heard thee say that once before, Urman, the time we fought the Edomites."

"The man who can cut his way through an army and leave a path of dead bodies for his followers can be my leader even unto death. And is it not written that no heir of the Sacred Stone shall die without issue, and his seed utterly perish?"

"The Sacred Stone?"

"Yes; has not thy royal father told thee of it?"

"Say no more, Urman. My father, in the time that is seemly, will reveal this matter." Talmai remembered the large sapphire possessed by his father, but he knew naught of its history.

"As for that, my prince, I know little save the tradition and the command that passes from father to son in our family to remain faithful to the Master of the Sacred Stone, as upon his fortune depends our own."

Talmai made a sign to drop the subject, and Urman suggested a test of the espionage. With Itti-Bel as a guide, they sauntered forth, passing through close streets where beasts of burden jostled pedestrians, and by narrow shops filled to overflowing with wares. Their destination was the public baths at which Talmai and Urman spent some time in dreamful repose, listening to the news of the kingdom. While they were thus engaged Itti-Bel seized the opportunity to transact a little private business of his own. Then they engaged the services of a barber, and, after their hair had been oiled and dressed in the

style of the period, they strolled down the street of the diviners where the Gambalian submitted his fate to various tests with highly encouraging interpretations. They also visited the public resorts where female singers for hire held forth, and they witnessed the performances of street jugglers and the handlers of serpents and scorpions. They joined the groups around professional storytellers who enchained the attention of their hearers with marvellous tales of miraculous adventure, and they listened to the songs of wandering minstrels.

Urman's pleasure in these scenes was unaffected, sincere, and absorbing, but, as Talmai had seen many similar ones in Damascus, Palmyra and Carchemish, his thoughts were more frequently on Sherah and his present situation. At first, after leaving the Ford of the Rising Sun, the image of the young woman was shadowy and intermittent. As time passed recollections of her crowded other thoughts and were now beginning to dominate with mild insistency. It was at one moment her lively and sparkling eye and modest yet piquant look that broke in upon his revery, or a vision of a perfect mouth and vermilion lips, cheeks that supplied the place of the anemone, a firm rounded chin, or a full tantalising throat. He had consecrated his life to the rehabilitation of his family, of which he and his father alone remained, and marriage was only an incident in his scheme for the perpetuation of his race. Love had never entered into his consideration, nor did he now realize that the disease had fastened upon him.

The alert Itti-Bel made it his special duty to observe if they were followed, and he soon discovered that, no matter how firmly convinced were their enemies of his new patron's inability to break through their net, they did not relax vigilance. The man in the red cap followed them everywhere.

Thus the sun ploughed its furrows toward the gate of the entering in, and darkness came on.

Urman had conceived no further plan of departure

than to force their way past the guard at the southern gate. Beyond there they would be in the open, for the southern part of the outer wall, Nimitti-Bel, was less advanced toward completion than the northern, and it was improbable that they would encounter a second guard there or thereabout. It was decided to steal away from the inn at some time between midnight and dawn.

As the shadows lengthened in the courtyard of the Inn of the Seven Doors campfires invaded the darkness and the faint odour of the wild lavender twigs with which the blazes were fed penetrated the atmosphere. The benediction of evening descended upon the earth, and the men of the court turned from the cares of the day, and gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the plaintive notes of pipe and tambour and the drowsy tales of wanderers. It was nearing midnight when Talmai withdrew to his room for a few hours' rest. He closed and barred the ponderous door behind him, but the sudden remembrance of a forgotten instruction for Urman caused him to pause. Turning around he moved the bar and pushed on the heavy wooden portal. It did not move nor could he make it move. It was fastened against him on the outside. The hand of Khar-mes had fallen as softly as had the shades of night.

Chapter XVII

BELSHAZZAR REPORTS TO HIS MASTER

TO the high and noble Khar-mes, sakkanaku of Babylon, ishshaku-ziru of Bel-Merodach, beloved of Bel and Beltis, upon whom Ea has bestowed wisdom, to whom Nebo and Tasmit have given broad ears that he might have seeing eyes, the holder up of the reed of the double white cup which determines destiny:— To the strong sangu who pours out libations writes Belshazzar, thy servant and the dust of thy feet. At the feet of the elect of Bel and the great gods I bow seven times and seven times with my heart and my back. May Bel and Beltis give power to my lord. Let the holy Khar-mes listen to the words of Belshazzar.

When the holy man of Eridu quit the effulgent presence of my lord, my lord said: "Follow him." I obeyed these words with all my true heart. Behold, as a greyhound hangs to the heels of a hare, as a falcon let loose from its master's hand hovers over the black partridge, so I followed the man of Eridu. In all his windings I followed him. Hither and thither among the dealers darted he, procuring the holy things for midnight enchantment and witchcraft. In the Park of Istar, in a lonely spot, among the trees, the cedars and the palm trees, piled he the herbs of the garden and the fruit of the garden, consecrated flesh, a white lamb, dates and cones, water, honey, and butter, together with wine in a sacrificial cup. From the shadow of the close trees these things I noted. Muttering chants to Ninakha-kudda, the mistress of spells, he set up a green branch, and laid a pavement of brickwork aslope, and thereon sacrificed the white lamb, piled up the dates and cones, pouring out

oil, water, and honey. He took the oil of the sherbin of Phenicia and in the middle of this oil pure incense put, and pieces of pure food, clean herbs, wood of the tall tree, thorn wood, and the slice of a snake he compounded together and lay in the middle of the oil of sherbin. Two images of the god of joy set he up by the light of the burning at the entrance of the pavement of brickwork. Four fire-stones, four bits of gold, four crystals, and four seals he produced. Thrice he dipped them into the oil of sherbin, thrice anointed himself, and, as he placed those stones between the gods of joy, he thrice repeated this incantation: "Thou, O god of joy, art the weapon of Ea and Merodach! Behold the enchantment and the witchcraft that has been devised! Hear! O god and goddess of mankind!"

The bits of gold and the seal were consumed in the sacrificial fire, but over the fire-stone and the crystals waved he a feather, muttering magical incantations. The spell was slow, and thus he prayed between his incantations: "O altar son of heaven, may the son of Ea, Merodach, the son of Eridu, purify my hand! May he make pure my mouth, may he make bright my foot!"

His eyes filled with the shadow of the forest, his face shone like a mask of gold and eagerly he gazed into the depths of the crystals for some message from the gods, and the feather waved softly. Like one who has fallen into the fire he quivered. I crept forward, my master, to gaze into the translucent depths of the magic stones, but some strange odour in the sacrifice weighed heavily on my heart. Flashes of light began to pass between the feather and the crystals like stars of heaven shooting through the air, and I knew the charm was perfecting its bond, that his gods were bringing him aid. Even then, at that time, a cloud crept in between us.

His prayers I could hear through the cloud, the god thundered on the ground, the earth rocked, the god burnt up the darkness, the lightning struck the altar, the fire rekindled, glowed, flickered, and then Ninazu, the mother

of darkness, like the swoop of a hawk, with her mantle covered him. Blinded and groping stood I, my god went from my body, my spirit passed beyond Datilla, the river of death, I was as one dead.

How long I remained in this condition I know not, but Nebo the restorer had compassion on me, and, as the sun-god raised his head above the land, my god returned, and my eyesight was restored. Before me on the ground I beheld the oracle, asleep, and by him the black ashes of his sacrifice, around which there lingered the odour of burnt meat. There was an abyss in my stomach. Food I had not eaten, water I had not drunk since the accursed thief stole the Amulet of Bel. I was about to utter up a prayer to Mubarra, the fire-flame, and seize a piece of roasted flesh when the man of Eridu moved. Hardly had I hidden myself when he arose, hastened to the river, lustily intoned a hymn to Shamas, bathed himself, and started off at a rapid gait. Numb and stiff I followed.

Already were the people emerging from the hidden depths of the woods, the women of the temple, the daughters of the tents, and the men, and there was clamour at the food stalls. The oracle pushed his way forward and bought dates. Just then the god Ner caused to drive past on a white mule a devotee bringing his tithe of dates. Knowing the man I stopped him, and, telling him to report to the shatamu of the temple for recompense, I took his animal and his tithe. Rejoicing my heart in the dates, I awaited the next move of the oracle of Eridu.

I will not weary thee with details, my lord, of the oracle's movements till he left the temple precinct, making for the Cutha gate of Imgur-Bel. Having passed the gate, he sat down by the wayside and waited. I hid the mule in the guard chamber in the interior of the gate and waited. In a short while a man wearing a traveller's robe drove up from the city in a closed cart. The oracle bespoke the man and entered the cart which then proceeded. Mounting my mule, I took up the same course, and in this manner we went northward. The cart-driver

tried to evade me, but the gods raised a dust wherever he went, and the dust was my guide. The cart stopped in front of the gate of an Egibi warehouse and cottage at the Ford of the Rising Sun.

Like the divine hound Iltebu, I waited. A woman came forth, veiled, and a servant. They took the cart and drove away, whither I know not. Then, oh beneficent one, was mine eye gladdened, for forth from the gate came the Aramean who overthrew the Ionian captain and stole the sacred Amulet. I knew him, though when thou didst demand of me a mark by which he might be known I failed thee, noble master. When again I saw the young man I recognised many things by which I should have known him. Thou shalt judge my judgment. As between following the oracle or the Aramean, as between the shadow and the substance, I could not hesitate. My goddess said: Follow the Aramean.

The young man proceeded to a nearby inn where he hired a boatman to take him down stream to Hillat. Thither I went behind him, leaving the mule, my lord, with Rahu, the boatman.

The Aramean walked from the river at Hillat to the inn known as The House of the Seven Doors. Hunger burnt my stomach, and thirst inflamed me, and the spirits were about to depart from my body when Barak the Jew appeared before me. He told me thou hadst given him twelve kasbu in which to find the maiden, and that he sought her in Hillat, among the Jews. I informed him of the abduction of the girl by the Aramean and set him in disguise of a brickmaker as a watch over the Aramean. Then I ate, I rejoiced, I rested.

This, my lord, is my vindication for pursuing the Aramean instead of the oracle. I have the Aramean like a bird in a trap, bolted in a strong room of the inn with Barak and an itinerant priest on guard over the only door. The goddess Mamit, the maker of fate, to him his fate brings. In his keeping, I am convinced, is the Amulet or knowledge of it. Let the noble high priest of

Bel command, and whatever comes forth from his mouth will I perform.

When my master leaves the house of libations may the spirits of the earth, the great gods, grant him long life and goodness of heart. May Ea make him glad. May Bel utter words of blessing to him. May Davkina, the queen of the deep, enlighten him with her sheen. May Merodach, the great overseer of the spirits of heaven, exalt his head.

My lord, send back my messenger quickly and let me know thy will. Behold, I am a servant of the sakkanaku and the footstool of his feet.

Written from Hillat, month of Nisan, 10th day, 19th year of Nabopalassar, king of Babylon.

Come With Me Into Babylon

Book II

BOOK TWO

Chapter XVIII

THE LAD ITTI-BEL RESCUES THE ARAMEAN—THE FIGHT IN THE VESTIBULE OF THE GATE

AGAIN and again did Talmai try the heavy door, quietly, but with all his strength.

It was firm as the brick wall.

The doorway was wide and high to admit light in the daytime; at night light was little used. The door opened outward.

Talmai mounted a wooden stool and looked through the grated opening. His range of vision covered but a small corner of the yard, and he saw nothing more than flickering shadows from the fires and heard but the noises made by tethered horses. To raise a cry would be useless. Strange it is there is no guard, thought he.

There came a rustling noise from below him, outside.

"Back! Away boy!" some one said in a low voice and so near that the order appeared to come from directly beneath his feet.

"There is a guard," Talmai thought.

Then he heard the voice of Itti-Bel, in response. "Why art thou here?" The question came with a honeyed accent of ignorance.

"It is my place to watch the Aramean," was the reply.

Talmai recognised the voice. Barak was the man on guard.

"Beware of meddling with the affairs of Khar-mes!" the voice continued. "To thy bed and away with thee, boy!"

"So thou hast arrested him?" Itti-Bel asked in such

a pleased tone that Talmai was pained by the lad's duplicity.

Barak did not respond in words, but Talmai saw Itti-Bel jump nimbly to one side, as though dodging something. He heard the boy laugh softly, and then silence ensued. Evidently Itti-Bel had gone. Talmai stepped down from the stool and made an examination of the room as best he could in the darkness. It was long and narrow, with a vaulted roof, and bricked on every side, and from the fact that the walls were not covered with stucco, which would have been the case had it been originally destined for human habitation, he concluded that it must have been used formerly as one of the inn magazines. He was aware of the thickness of such a wall and the hopelessness of successfully attacking it. There was no exit, except by the door. Talmai considered the feasibility of breaking through the brick flooring and burrowing a way out, but a moment's reflection convinced him of the futility of such an undertaking in the time at his disposal.

While reconnoitering Talmai heard a noise outside and remounted the stool.

"So, Barak," one said, "thou art resolved to watch through the night. It is well, and I bring thee a companion to share thy vigil."

"I am able alone to perform it, Belshazzar," was the response.

"A hard day thou hast had and mayest fall asleep."

The speaker moved into the moonlight within the circle of Talmai's vision.

"So be it. What of the morning?"

"I await orders from the great high priest, to whom an account of all that has transpired have I sent, not omitting a statement of thy faithful service."

"I thank thee, great priest. There is no danger of rescue by these Gambalians?"

"As safely barred and sealed are they as is thy prisoner. Knows he that he is caged?"

"No sound has escaped him."

"Our master prefers these things done without the knowledge of the people. Bring a stool that I may look upon the captive."

While Barak was procuring something for the priest to stand upon Talmai stretched himself upon the uncovered wooden divan in one corner. His form would be indistinctly visible from the grating. He saw the square of light in the door darken and almost felt the keen gaze of the priest upon him. Then the face disappeared, and silence once more reigned.

Talmai calmly considered his position and could arrive at no conclusion of a soothing nature. If Urman and his men freed themselves, they could not attack and overpower his two jailers without arousing the hostelry, and even if they should get away from the inn on their horses they would be pursued with a hue and cry which would warn the soldiers at the gate of Imgur-Bel to close that road to freedom.

Then Talmai thought of what would happen when he was taken before the high priest, and he refused to divulge the whereabouts of Sherah. There would be torture, of course, mutilation, and after that death. Death of itself had no terror for him, though it would end his race. He could not believe his days were fulfilled, or his appointed time had arrived.

Once more he went the rounds of his room, softly tapping the walls with a dagger handle, in the hope of detecting a weak spot, but the responsive sound indicated that the wall was thick and solid everywhere. The vaulted roof was quite beyond his reach, and Talmai entertained no designs there, as he knew it must be very thick and stout, and that above the arch of brick there was, as on all roofs, a superposed mass of earth.

Again Talmai mounted the stool at the door, with some indefinite idea of working upon Barak for his freedom. The steward was not to be seen, but the other jailer, a priest, walked to and fro in front of the door, watchful

and alert. Barak, he surmised, was coiled up, possibly asleep, at the doorway. The moon was not visible to him, but its light was brilliant. The shadows indicated that midnight was past.

More wearied than if he had ridden all day and night, Talmai lay down upon the divan. He thought he could not sleep, but his eyelids became heavy and closed in slumber.

Once more he was free and wandering under the palms and the blue sky of the fertile valley watered by the two rivers. Beside him walked two strange figures clad in saffron coloured linen, silk vestments, and yellow shoes. Their faces and eyelids were painted like a woman's, and on their heads they wore small priestly mitres. He recognised in them the typical itinerant eunuch priests, and, despite the paint on their faces, he saw that one was Barak and the other Belshazzar. The Judean drove with a whip a fat white donkey on which was a square upright case covered with curtains. Beneath the curtains was the image of some goddess which, judged by the attire of the priests, must be the image of the goddess of love and procreation. By the side of it hung the cymbals and timbrels, which were always played lustily when approaching a town. Glancing down, Talmai perceived to his horror and disgust that he was costumed like the other two. He stopped short, when, with a mocking smile, Barak raised the whip he was carrying and smote him across the face.

The next instant Talmai found himself in the middle of the floor sword in hand and striking at what had been the vision of the Judean but was now empty space. His face yet tingled from the lash.

"My lord!"

The words came to his ears, low, sibilant, clear. Talmai was stupid from slumber and could not dissociate the words and his hideous dream.

"My lord!" This time fully awakening, Talmai caught the direction of the voice.

"I listen," he responded as softly.

"Thank Zeus!" he heard, and, looking up at the roof, he caught a glimpse of sky, shining through a narrow aperture which also framed a tousled head of hair.

"It is Itti-Bel," continued the voice. "Dost know thou art a prisoner?"

"Wait." Talmai stepped to the door and from the stool surveyed the outside. Except for the stamping of horses' feet, all was still. The priest was walking back and forth with bent head. Listening intently, he heard the heavy breathing of Barak just outside the door. The opening in the roof was directly over the divan. Mounting this slight elevation, he said to Itti-Bel: "Mine enemies have dug well their pit."

"I had to drop clods on thee to waken thee," whispered the lad.

The blow in the face, mused Talmai.

"I have a rope," continued Itti-Bel, "but must make larger this hole."

"What is the hour?" asked Talmai.

"The first kasbu after midnight has passed."

"Hasten, then, my lad."

"One moment," whispered Itti-Bel. "A covenant have I to make."

Talmai uttered an impatient expression which caused the lad to mutter back angrily in Greek. The Nabathean stepped quickly to the door and peered out through the grating. The noise made by himself and Itti-Bel, or by another cause, had disturbed the priest, who stood in the attitude of attention. Then he resumed his pacing back and forth.

"Thy conditions—what are they?"

"That I go with thee."

Talmai smiled to himself. "A slave a day," he thought, recollecting that only the night before he had aided Sherah to escape.

"Granted. Canst thou release the Gambalians?"

"Over them is no guard, and they have been warned to be ready."

"Then hasten Itti-Bel."

"Hold thy robe, that no soil may fall upon the floor," directed the lad, in a cool tone of command.

Talmai pulled off the garment, readjusting his belt, girdle, and weapons over his tunic, and held out the robe as directed. No more was said for what seemed to the Nabathean a long time, momentarily expecting the priest to peep into the room. Itti-Bel had to proceed silently, but his steady work told, and the hole grew larger and larger. Finally he let down the end of a rope. Talmai handed up his lance, and, disposing his Babylonian robe upon the divan so that to a casual observer from the door it would appear to be covering his sleeping form, he tugged at the rope.

"Ready," answered Itti-Bel, and Talmai pulled himself up. Clambering noiselessly through the aperture, he remained crouched, to avoid being observed by any one in the court and did not at first perceive Itti-Bel lying prone near by, with the end of the rope twined about his waist. As he did not move Talmai reached over and shook him. The lad groaned feebly, and Talmai placed his hand over his mouth to prevent any louder utterance. Itti-Bel inclined his head to indicate that his wits were fully restored and in pantomime explained that there was no other way to fasten the rope while Talmai was climbing up than by tying it around his body, and the constriction caused by his weight was exceedingly painful. He pulled out the end dangling through the aperture and spread his ragged cloak over the hole to prevent the moonlight shining into the cell.

The roof was nearly flat with low parapets on both sides, and Itti-Bel moved quietly to the outer parapet. Talmai followed and saw, leaning against the wall, a log that had once served as a house beam. Down this they slid, landing in a neighbouring garden, and the lad motioned to Talmai to take up the beam and follow him.

Itti-Bel was yet weak from the terrible compression he had endured, and Talmai observed that his hands were bleeding.

Itti-Bel walked cautiously along the wall of the inn toward the rear until he came to a brick dividing wall stretching in the semi-darkness beyond the inn enclosure.

Obeying the lad's gesture, Talmai stood the beam against this new wall and mounted it, swinging Itti-Bel up after. He then drew up the log, and they let themselves down into what proved to be the caravansary yard for untethered beasts of burden, an auxiliary enclosure in the rear of the main court. Here Talmai's Martha and the horses of the Gambalians were bestowed. Itti-Bel led the way through a wide passage into the large court where, hidden from view by intervening objects, Barak and the priest watched Talmai's door. The place with its close array of spectral tents looked ghostly in the moonlight. The boy ran with light step to a barred door facing the great yard, removed the bars and noiselessly opened it.

Standing expectantly inside were Urman and his warriors. They stepped forth without a word, each carrying riding-pad, bridle and surcingle. His own horse trappings were handed to Talmai, and swiftly and quietly the men walked back into the rear yard, where they found and soon had their horses ready for action.

"What now?" asked Urman in a low growl, of Itti-Bel, who was following Talmai. The two leaders looked at the youth with anxiety. His quick, prompt and effective methods and perfect knowledge of the surroundings made him master of the situation.

Itti-Bel scanned the northern sky and located the "tip of the tail of the dog"—Cynosura was its name in his country. Then he scanned the eastern sky for the star which he knew as Alpha, and the Babylonians called Dilkar, "the announcer of light." It had not yet arisen, but Aldebaran blazed with fiery glory.

"There remains but a kasbu of night," said Itti-Bel.

"As well daylight as this moon," growled the chief.

"Silence!" commanded Itti-Bel. "Lift that voice of noise again, and here I leave ye."

The grizzled chief stifled another growl and relapsed into silence, thinking the boy whom he had beaten was taking a mean revenge.

"My lord, but one way out is there and that is by the way ye came in. The porter must be bound and gagged. He is asleep, no doubt, as never was he known to keep awake at his post. After that—what, my lord?"

"The southern gate. If that fails, the river."

"Let it be thy task to put a covering on the porter's lip. I with thy horse and lance will follow. The Gambalians must follow me. The priest at thy prison door cannot see us for the tents that are between. Others who may see will think us travellers taking an early start."

Without more ado Talmai turned back into the courtyard, and, crossing it on the side farthest from where Barak and his companion kept watch over his room, he reached unobserved the broad arched gateway. The room of the porter was a cell or recess in the wall opening upon the passage, beyond which was the open street. Approaching cautiously he looked in at the door. As Itti-Bel had suggested, the porter was asleep, and Talmai had him bound and gagged before he was thoroughly awake. Like a bundle of discarded clothing, he tossed the slave into a corner and stepped out into the passage where Itti-Bel awaited him. The Gambalians came up one by one, holding their horses' nostrils, and they went on out into the street, where all mounted, Itti-Bel behind Talmai.

Urman set off ahead, at first slowly, but increasing the pace as they rode on through the cool moonlit streets, which took on more and more the appearance of country roads as the horsemen proceeded. Instead of rows of houses there was row after row of highly coloured brick

walls of private residences hiding from outsiders the suburban homes of wealthy persons.

"My lord," said Urman, when they were travelling on a sandy stretch where the horses walked, "I ask the privilege of recompensing this youth."

What Talmai might have said was interrupted by a pleasantly mocking laugh. "Some balm, then, O prince of patience," the lad remarked, with a mixture of seriousness and mirth.

The chief did not reply. The pertinency of the retort either embarrassed or angered him.

"Tell me, Itti-Bel," asked Talmai, "how didst thou succeed in opening the room in which I was barred. The task was more than a man's."

"The chance, my lord, by which thou wert born under a lucky star. Of one hundred such rooms in the Inn of the Seven Doors this was the one that was entered by thieves two weeks ago. In it was stored a very valuable cargo of silk and cotton goods from the Ind, and certain robbers set about obtaining possession of them. Access to the roof they gained as I did to-night, but the labour of digging out the bricks after removing the soil on top surely required more than a night's time—two, it may be three nights' work. They succeeded, however, because the master of the inn was too penurious to guard it properly, and because of his penuriousness a slave, one Itti-Bel, was required to apply his odd moments to the task of replacing the bricks and repairing the hole, while his master got together money for the judge who was hearing the suit brought by the owner of the stolen goods."

Urman chuckled. He knew something of judges.

"Having no mortar, this lazy fellow, Itti-Bel, replaced the bricks as best he could, and the evidence of his poor workmanship concealed with loose earth. The room no longer was used as a magazine, and it was my master's good fortune to hire it."

"Thy master?" queried the Gambalian.

"Yes, my new master, my lord Talmai. Art thou angry with me, my lord?"

"No, my lad, but running away with other people's property is not seemly. Thy purchase money will I send to the innkeeper."

Itti-Bel laughed merrily again, a laugh which was pleasant to the ear.

"With the thought that it is I who am running away with thee, console thyself, my prince. Of my intent to change masters thou wert informed."

The remark amused the Gambalian chief, who chuckled and gurgled at an alarming rate in lieu of the strident laughter to which he dared not give vent.

"Until we are out of this stress, my lord," persisted the boy, "it would go hard with me should I fall into other hands. No tablet of manumission have I."

"Be content. For a while thou art under my protection. I will surely restore thee to thy country."

"We have a saying," said Itti-Bel, "that, to a slave deprived of his country, a good master is his country. Yesterday when thou wert at the baths I sought a scribe, a worthy man who frequents the inn, and for a part of the money thou didst give me he undertook to propitiate the keeper, should I disappear. As I had no witness, he could make out no tablet for me."

"For a boy of thy years thou thinkest shrewdly," said Urman.

"Yes, my lord, for a boy of my years."

They had passed beyond the region of closely set houses and walled gardens, and occasionally, from field or cottage, emerged a man bound for the city market with a wicker basket heaped with vegetables on his head. Suddenly the star Dil-kar, the messenger of the rising sun, shot up into the horizon.

"Soon will we come to the southern gate, son of Mathan," warned the chief.

"Do as it seems best," he was told, and he set up a livelier gait.

The fading glory of the stars and a pink flush in the east, where before there was a shifting gray, gave warning that the Sun-god Shamas was about to raise his head above the land.

The massive outline of the Tower of Bel was now visible behind them, robbed of its glowing colours, and as they emerged from an alley of acacia they saw in front, afar off, the great wall of Babylon, Imgur-Bel.

Across the fresh fields came the monotonous chant of a ploughman hidden from view by the foliage:

A heifer am I,
To the cow am I yoked:
The ploughhandle is strong—
A shaft of palm—
Lift it up!
Lift it up!

They rode on in silence, but exchanged meaning glances when they saw from a distance that the inner great gate in the wall, between two enormously strong flanking towers, was not closed, and an early pedestrian or two issuing from its cavernous mouth gave them every reason to believe the entire passageway to be open. Over one hundred feet, the gray wall rose above the city, and there were long perspectives of towers surmounting it as far as the eye could reach, for it was a day's journey around this "fence of Babylon." Eight chariots could be driven abreast on top of it, and the people much resorted to this high and spacious promenade for diversion and for the view to be obtained.

The sun had not yet risen, though it gilded the golden apex of the Tower of Bel when the small cavalcade drew up in the vestibule or advanced work of the dark vaulted passage through the wall—over one hundred feet long—and on the other side of this passage was an outer vesti-

bule. The soldiers on duty at the gate were stationed in this outer vestibule, though some might be stationed in the large transepts, or recessed chambers, which opened off the passage in the bowels of the wall. From these transepts staircases in the brickwork led to rooms over the vault and to the battlements far above. When they were all closed the several gates in the depth of the passage made it impregnable, but these also at this time of security were invariably wide open.

Urman glanced inquiringly at Talmai, who nodded toward the dark passage. The chief urged his horse into it, the iron hoofs of the animal clattering loudly upon the limestone slabs with which it was paved. Far ahead of him was a clear semicircle of light, where the passage ended, and the outer vestibule began. Beyond that was the open country.

The last of the Gambalians had hardly got well into the tunnel when the hoofbeats of a running horse were heard coming from the city.

"We are pursued," said the chief.

The noise increased in volume till the horse's hoofs struck the limestone slabs of the passage, where it hummed and reverberated shrilly. At the same time the rider slightly slackened his pace, and the Gambalians saw him in silhouette at the entrance behind them.

"Block the way," Urman said to his men.

"The messenger of the king!" they heard a voice behind them crying sternly. "Way for the messenger of the king."

He was answered with a sarcastic laugh from the Gambalians.

"The king's messenger!" one said. "Show thy credentials if thou dost expect us to give way."

"Make all speed to the gate," Urman said in a low tone to Talmai.

"Ho! officer of the gate!" shouted the man in the rear. "Arrest these men!"

Urman and Talmai emerged from the dark tunnel into

the outer vestibule, and, as they did so, two soldiers, hearkening to the cries of the pursuers, seized their horses by the bits.

"Stand!" they ordered.

The sudden action and the glare of light after darkness startled the animals, and, though both the chief and Talmai pretended to curb them, they got between the soldiers and the outer gateway before they were quieted.

"Arrest these men!" again came the command from the dark passage. More soldiers, who had been lounging half asleep in the vestibule, hastened forward with lowered spears and surrounded the Gambalians as they rode out.

The messenger loudly repeated the order of arrest.

The noise drew other guards from the transept in the tunnel, where they had been asleep.

Talmai and Urman understood each other as they manœuvred to keep between the soldiers and the great outer gate. Itti-Bel clung to Talmai with difficulty.

"Let them escape not, on peril of your lives," commanded the messenger.

"Where is the captain of the guard?" haughtily demanded Urman.

An officer stepped forward from the tunnel and looked with heavy, red eyes upon the group.

"Who is it creates tumult at the king's gate?" he asked savagely, having just awakened.

"This man," explained a subordinate, pointing to the messenger, "demands the arrest of these travellers."

The soldiers dropped their holds on the horse's bits and looked expectantly at their captain.

"By special order of the king. The order is on the way," added the messenger.

Urman gazed around contemptuously, measuring the strength of the guard.

"Words do not break bones," said Talmai, interpreting the glance. He was extremely desirous of escaping without bloodshed.

Something in the tone of Talmai's voice irritated the captain, whose brain was still in the thrall of wine.

"Insolent nomads," he exclaimed, drawing his sword and stepping quickly in advance to strike Talmai. He had not taken three paces before one of the Gambalians with a lance pierced the officer's throat.

There was a moment of dumb, horrified silence, broken by the heavy fall of the stricken man.

"Charge, Gambalians!"

As Urman spoke he plunged, lance at point, upon the largest group of Babylonians, his men with him. Though four times more numerous, the guardsmen, surprised by the suddenness of the assault, made but a futile attempt to parry the lances, and broke for the shelter of the passage. Many, however, were left writhing on the pavement with fatal wounds.

Urman stopped in his savage work when he perceived that Talmai took no part.

"The messenger," said he in his grim way, pointing to one of the forms, "has no further use for this horse. It is our spoil of war."

"I like not this business," answered Talmai. "It will bring a regiment on our heels."

"True," rejoined Urman coolly, "but since fight we must, it is well to have won the first skirmish. Let Itti-Bel mount the messenger's horse, and we will flee to the marshes."

Itti-Bel's pale face appeared from behind Talmai's back.

"Shall I take the horse my lord?" he asked.

"Yes, and quickly. The soldiers will soon return."

Itti-Bel slid down, but before mounting the other horse he snatched up a sword that had fallen from a soldier's belt, though the sight and scent of blood sickened him. The lances of the Gambalians reeked with it, and around every recumbent form a red pool was growing larger and larger.

"To the marshes!" Urman ordered, seeing the lad

mounted, and, turning their horse's heads to the white road stretching down a long palm-lined avenue, they darted out from the shadow of Imgur-Bel into the clear daylight and the open country. Talmai, glancing back, saw a gesticulating mob of soldiers pouring from the dark mouth of the tunnel into the bloody vestibule, and heard the wild shout of rage that went up when they beheld the fleeing party.

Chapter XIX

PURSUIT AND REPULSE

GUIDESTONE after guidestone was passed before the fugitives breathed their horses. Though they were encountered by numbers of persons on foot and in vehicles, there was nothing in their appearance to draw upon them curious attention, the evidences of bloodshed having been hastily removed from garb and weapons. Similar parties of tribesmen returning to their distant homes in different parts of the kingdom were common sights on the highway at this season.

Urman's blood had cooled, and he began to reproach himself for the inculpatory slaughter in the outwork, and the Gambalian who slew the captain of the guard had misgivings about his action in precipitating the affray. As Talmai rode on in silence their apprehension grew.

"My lord," finally said the chief, slacking his speed. "To all the sixty-five thousand gods of heaven and earth in atonement for my rash behaviour, will I offer propitiatory gifts. On my head and on the head of my people will descend the anger of Nabopalassar."

"Upon my head rest the blame," said the Gambalian who killed the officer. "Let my lord say it, and I will return and deliver myself for the king's vengeance."

"Peace, my faithful Urman, and thou, my defender," turning to the other. "I would know thy name that it may be enrolled in the list of my friends."

"Buzuzu I am called," answered the Gambalian, "the son of Kuddaa, who fought side by side with the great and noble Mathan."

"My lord," broke in the chief, "that we will be hotly pursued, there is no doubt. Seizing horses by the way, the

king's troops can follow us rapidly. Albeit if Pula the Pekod is true, we are safe if we can but gain his city in the midst of the marshes. To the outposts of his territory it is yet a long day's journey. From Keffil we should send a messenger to him and obtain consent to enter the marshland. Consent obtained we can procure boats and disappear in the marshes. Buzuzu can ride ahead and prepare Pula for our coming."

"Do as thou thinkest best."

Urman gave instructions to his warrior, who started off at a rapid gait.

Keffil was a loyal Babylonian stronghold thirty miles southwest of the great city, but no message could reach there in advance of them. The district they were now in was thickly populated and was called Edinu, "the fertile plain." North and south of Keffil extended vast and labyrinth marshes created by the overflow and seepage of the Euphrates and the canals west of Babylon, particularly the Arachtu or "River of Babylon." South of these marshes, was the extensive fresh-water lake Nedjif, and far south of the Nedjif were the greater marshes of the Lower Euphrates, along and in which the Gambalians and allied tribes had their home.

The party travelled on at a steady gait, passing through many villages and beneath the shade of royal palms, now crowned with their creamy and odorous blossoms. Above all the product of Babylonia, above wheat, barley, millet, sesame, fruit, and vegetables, the stately date-palm was the most bounteous in its provision for man. Among its three hundred and sixty enumerated uses were included food, drink, clothing, and shelter. In religion it was the symbol of life and eternity.

At last Itti-Bel, no longer able to endure fatigue and lack of sleep, fell from his horse and curled up by the side of the road.

"Go on, my lord," he said faintly, "I but hinder thee. Leave me here."

"Courage, Itti-Bel," responded Talmai. "I see an inn

ahead of us. There we can take rest and refreshment. Come, I will carry thee."

"No, no," answered Itti-Bel, with a dolorous shake of the head, "I will cling behind thee."

He reached up a hand and Talmai lightly swung him upon the back of Martha. Urman caught Itti-Bel's horse by the bridle, and they rode to the inn, one of those wayside shelters which were thickly scattered along the approaches to Babylon. There Urman engaged a latticed summer house surrounded by a lawn. Itti-Bel sought a shady spot and immediately fell asleep.

"A brave heart in a weak body," remarked the chief. "But for him, we would now be prisoners, possibly dead. Beneath his dirt and tattered garments there are marks of gentle breeding. Observe the smallness of his wrists and ankles."

It was near the midhour of day, and the men groomed and fed their horses, after which they bathed and ate. Itti-Bel was awakened, and he also refreshed himself and announced his readiness to mount and continue the journey.

"I can almost smell the reeds of the marshes," Urman remarked, as they galloped westward.

They had not proceeded far when Talmai commanded a halt and silence. He listened attentively. "Our pursuers are fast upon us," said he.

"Yes," said Urman, after a pause, "They are coming, and in number."

The chief's face lighted up in anticipation of the conflict. He dismounted, tightened the girth, and examined the bit and bridle of his horse, an example all, with the exception of Itti-Bel, followed. The lad viewed these preparations with dilated eyes. At this point the road skirted a large main canal, the sides of which were considerably higher than their heads as they sat on their horses. Not far in front of them the canal turned southward at right angles and Talmai decided to take a position beyond this turn, whence they could obtain a comprehensive view of

the attacking force as it swept around the corner of the high waterway. He would direct the movement of the Arameans after observing the strength of the enemy.

One side of the road was closed in by the canal wall, while a grove of palms shut it in on the other. A thick hedge grew between the road and the grove, and at this hedge Talmai detected Itti-Bel casting anxious eyes.

"My boy," said he, "thou art too weak and weary to help us. Ride on and if we are defeated make thy escape."

"No," answered the youth, though his face belied his words of courage. "I have cast in my fortunes with thine and abide the chance."

The thundering of horse hoofs upon the hard earth could now be distinctly heard above the sounds of nature, and the little group was surprised to hear an echo, apparently back of them.

"What means that?" asked the Gambalian, anxiously. "Can they have surrounded us?"

Talmai, scanning the road, saw three tall lances glittering above a cloud of dust raised by horsemen.

"One Gambalian, two Pekods," he answered, even at that distance distinguishing the tribal tufts fluttering on the weapons.

"Buzuzu and reinforcements," joyously exclaimed the chief. "But look! here comes the enemy!"

The Babylonian soldiers had to cross a high point in the road at the turn of the canal, and, as they poured over this like a flood of Sivan, the Arameans could roughly count them in batches of fours and fives, till they numbered two score, and still came. Itti-Bel looked anxiously at the Nabathean. Talmai's face was cold, stern, repellent, and there were lines about the mouth which the lad had not seen before.

"Steady, men," said Talmai in a firm resonant voice. "Give me twenty paces start, then follow."

"But, my lord," remonstrated Urman, "thou shalt not charge alone."

"Obey me," shortly replied Talmai. With a word to the already excited mare Martha he was off like an arrow out of a bow.

The spectacle of one horseman dashing down upon them disconcerted the Babylonians, and their leaders, not realising that it was a charge, pulled their horses' reins so suddenly that the horses behind them were thrown into momentary disorder, and reared and plunged. Into this mass of excited men and floundering beasts descended the young Nabathean, with couched lance in one hand and in the other a heavy short sword, his eyes burning with terribleness. Down upon them he bore, and, as the wild fierce battle shouts of the Gambalians sounded loud, shrill and defiant, he plunged into the midst of the Babylonians. Urman lost sight of him, but before he and his men struck the struggling heap he saw an opening in its centre and recognised the handiwork of Talmai.

It was well the Gambalian impact came as it did, for the son of Mathan was being fiercely beset by the soldiers in the second rank, who soon recovered from their confusion. He dropped his lance, and, drawing his other sword, he fought off all who could reach him with their spears. Martha he guided by the pressure of his knees, and the intelligent animal, trained to conflict, with eyes aflame and nostrils flared, partook of the spirit of the combat. Uttering savage cries, the enemy pressed in upon him, and with cut and thrust assailed from every quarter. The Nabathean, with such skill as they had never before witnessed, kept both swords swinging and swirling around like a play of lightning, protecting himself and killing or maiming all who came within the circle of his weapons. Urman, in his attempt to reach him, was also surrounded, but his warriors flung themselves into the affray and thus shielded his rear. He saw that Talmai could not much longer maintain himself against the force that was striving to break down his defense, and fought a way to his side.

The other Gambalians, charging the flanks of the foe,

turned the Babylonians, who seeing Buzuzu and his companions in the distance, and not knowing what reinforcements were coming up, became dismayed, and some wildly endeavoured to escape.

"Kill! kill!" roared the Gambalian chief fighting furiously with sword and lance. "Let none escape."

The moans and shrieks of the wounded and dying now mingled with the clash of weapons, and occasionally the anguished scream of a horse was heard above all other noises.

The Gambalians, fighting and shouting, had both flanks in complete disorder before Buzuzu and his two companions galloped into the melee. No more Babylonians came over the rise in the road, but neither Talmai nor Urman, blinded with the fever of fighting and the lust of slaughter knew or cared. The usually impassive face of the young Aramean was that of the god of destruction, and his double-handed sweep of swords left dead and dying behind him wherever he moved. Not a sound escaped his tightly pressed lips, as he cut and slashed with one sword and parried or guarded with the other, or struck with both at once. Urman, however, aimed to terrorize his opponents with his yells of battle as much as by his onslaught, but he could not maintain the pace set by Talmai, and repeatedly the Nabathean turned to his aid when the chief was in straits.

The Babylonians fought with fury, and especially bold was their leader, who alternately led the assault upon Talmai and Urman, or rallied his men. Urman finally recognised him.

"'Tis the priest of the inn," he shouted in Aramaic to Talmai.

Belshazzar, the chamberlain of the harem of Bel, divested of the cumbersome robe of his caste, was fighting more valiantly and desperately than his soldiers. Talmai, recalling his imprisonment in the caravansary, now made the priest his goal. Belshazzar saw him coming and was nothing loath to meet him.

"An hundred maneh for the capture of the man of two swords," the priest cried to his wavering force, urging his horse forward. His action, or the promised reward, revived the spirits of the Babylonians, and once more Talmai was put upon the defensive. By the chance of conflict Urman was on the outer edge of the heaving, battling mass, and, realising the imminent peril of his chieftain, he dashed back into the human whirlpool, calling aloud by name to his warriors as he slaughtered.

"Ho! Kharmaza, my captain!"

"Rasuh! Is thine arm weary!"

"Mandidi! Dost thou slumber!"

"Susanq! Spread thy terror!"

"Kill! Kill!"

"Sarludari! Thou who wooest!"

"To the rescue!"

Again the combatants parted before his onslaught, as with ferocious imprecations he rained blows thick and fast upon his foes. All the while Buzuzu and the Pekods were making strenuous efforts to break the circle around the Nabathean. A huge Babylonian was swinging a heavy mace to fling when Urman's sword descended upon his arm just before the weapon cleaved the air. The stroke severed the arm, but the mace struck Talmai a glancing blow, and he reeled from the force of the impact. Before he had fully recovered Belshazzar's sword darted forth to hew him down. Seeing it coming, Talmai struck backward, and his blow caught the priest upon the shoulder and knocked him to the earth, where he remained stunned and helpless.

The Babylonians were panic-stricken when they beheld the downfall of their priestly leader. Two of them caught him up between them and fled. Fear and terror seized the remainder, and they fell apart, and each sought safety in flight.

Their discomfiture was so precipitate that the Gambalian chief was dazed. As they broke past him, he struck out wildly.

"Kill! Kill!" he roared. and his warriors shouted:

"Kill! Kill!"

"After them!" he cried, but already the survivors of the Babylonians, carrying their wounded had disappeared over the rise in the road.

"By Nergal!" exclaimed the Gambalian, astonished at the sudden termination of the conflict.

"By Nergal!" he repeated, dismounting. "It was a noble fight."

The others also dismounted to look to their wounds, of which none was scatheless.

"The Babylonians will not draw rein until they arrive at Imgur-Bel," said Kharmaza.

"The way to the marshes is open," suggested Buzuzu.

They were interrupted by Urman, who had found two of his men, Rasuh and Sarludari, among the heaps of slain. Sarludari was to have been his daughter's husband.

"By Adar and all the gods and demons of the underworld they shall be avenged," he roared, mounting his horse to pursue the Babylonians.

"Content thyself for the present," said Talmai, and the chief remained.

Buzuzu brought forward the Pekods, Bani-ya and Banu-sin, whom he had by fortunate chance met while they were on their way to Keffil.

"These, my lord," said he addressing Talmai, "are the valiant sons of Pula, who on learning of thy peril hastened to thy aid."

"If my lord will honour our poor land," added the elder Pekod, Bani-ya, "its cities and its warriors are his to do with as he wills. Word of thy coming reached us through Buzuzu, whom we met on the road to Keffil."

"I thank ye, noble friends," responded Talmai. "Is thy father minded to give us refuge?"

"In the name of our father we entreat thee to make our poor territory thy abode. All children of Aram, whether Pekods, Gambalians, Nabatheans or Ruhuans,

are the servants of the son of Mathan. When the son of Mathan calls, against any enemy will we follow him, for his enemies are our enemies, and his friends our friends."

Talmai looked earnestly at the young man. The words in themselves were forms of courtesy, but the earnest and emphatic tone was a revelation to him, as he had accounted the powerful Pekods most uncertain friends, and therefore enemies, though never treacherous.

"We will talk of this matter at your father's house," he replied in a tone evincing his gratification. "Hast thou observed any gathering of people?" he asked of Urman.

"No. This must be some great nobleman's plantation, as it seems to reach far and wide."

Two of the Gambalian's men took up the dead bodies of their companions, and the party was about to move off when Talmai missed Itti-Bel and asked if anyone had seen the lad.

"By Adar!" exclaimed Buzuzu, bursting into laughter. "I saw him dive into the hedge as thou didst charge the enemy. There is his horse."

Talmai flushed. He liked the boy, but cowardice was a crime. Then he recalled Itti-Bel's brave conduct at the caravansary and his present weak condition.

"We must find him," he declared.

They began a search along the hedge, calling out the lad's name, apparently without result, though Talmai espied where he was in covert. He said to Urman: "Ride on with the others. I will find him. Tell the sons of Pula of the youth's bravery at the inn and remind your men of what we owe him."

"True, my lord," answered the impulsive chief. "It is not our way to forget favours done."

Talmai took the bridle of the horse Itti-Bel had been using, and, after the others had gone a short distance, he rode to a point in the hedge.

"Come hither, my lad," he said pleasantly. "We will

forget this failure of heart and remember only thy heroism last night."

Itti-Bel crawled from the hedge with tears of shame running down his cheeks. "'Tis of no avail, my lord," said he between his sobs, "my place is in the kitchen among the pots and pans. I have disgraced thee. Turn thy face from me, beat me, sell me, kill me."

"Come, mount," answered Talmai. "Now," he asked, in a kindly tone, as they rode on, "Tell me how it happened. I saw thou wert weak and unable to fight and advised thee to avoid the engagement."

"I know not how it came about, my lord. I intended to follow thee, for believe me no fear of death have I. But when their weapons I saw flashing and heard the battle shouts of Chief Urman as he charged, my heart left me, and I fled to the hedge."

Talmai could not but smile at the youth's earnestness, and with cheerful words encouraged him as they hurried after their comrades, promising to teach him to handle the lance, and the sword, and the bow. When they rejoined the others Itti-Bel was consoled by them also and listened with much amazement and no little pride to the account Urman gave the two Pekods of their rescue from the inn. This Itti-Bel had not considered a feat, but by the time the vivid imagination of the Gambalian had decorated it with garlands of speech the lad was much comforted, though for days after he refused to carry a sword.

"When I find I can act like a man I will carry a man's weapon," said he.

Chapter XX

IN THE MARSHES—THE ALLIANCE

WITH the Pekods as guides, they made a rapid detour to the south, as it was now the plan to avoid Keffil. It was a new land to the son of Mathan. In his journeying over the vast region extending from Nisibis in the north to the desert of Mas in the south, and from the Euphrates to the gates of Egypt, he had one purpose in view,—the reestablishment of his scattered people in an independent kingdom. The three great Aramean tribes of the lower Euphrates were the Gambalians, whose fidelity to his house was unshakable; the Nabatheans, scattered to the four quarters; and the Pekods, indifferent to his house, if not actually hostile, whom he had never visited. The minor tribes, the Khalat, Ruhua, Ubul, Malakh, Rapigu, Khindaru, Damanu, Tuhumuna, followed generally the fortunes of that one of the three principal tribes with which its relations were temporarily the closest. Many miles north, along the middle course of the Euphrates, in the general neighbourhood of the Khabour river, the powerful, aggressive and predatory Aramean tribe of the Sukhi had cut out a kingdom for itself, with Suru as the capital city, an uncouth survival, however, of the splendid and powerful Aramean kingdom which preceded the time of the rough Sukhi and endured for hundreds of years amidst a high state of civilisation. In Talmai's ambitious political schemes the Pekods could form not only an important link, but, in their naturally strong position on the edge of the Mesopotamian valley, be a buffer between Babylonia and the Aramean confederacy which he hoped to form. Previous overtures had been coldly received, and the unexpected friendliness

of the sons of Pula mystified him. Enlightenment was not long in coming.

"Our poets will have a new song to sing about the mighty son of Mathan, my lord," said Bani-ya, riding alongside him.

"Why sayst thou thus, noble Pekod?" answered Talmai. "If they sing of this day's event, the song will be of the valorous deeds of the sons of Pula."

"Honour enough will it be to have linked our names with thine. Already are thy exploits sung in tent and by campfire, from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt."

"I would that our names were linked together hereafter."

"To that end are matters turning, my lord. We have friends at the Babylonian court who send word there is a plan to drain these marshes and with tillers of the soil people the land. It shall not be. To the well-being of our people the marshes are necessary. From the sale of reeds used in making boats, baskets and houses, and for temple rites, many gain living and substance. Others upon the milk and butter of our buffaloes depend. The marshes are our fortresses. Away from them we would be as the wandering Arabian nomads. Long have I urged an alliance with thy house, but influences among our people have been for peace, and it is believed brotherhood and league with thee means war."

The last sentence was almost a question, but Talmai made no reply. The doubts in his mind were resolved. He saw a motive for the newly awakened amity of the Pekods, but he ascribed no selfish purpose to the young chief.

"I would," said he, "I could show my gratitude in something more than words. Be sure of this: if our meeting leads to an agreement, the sons of Pula and our noble friend and brother Urman shall be one with myself. With the tie of blood brotherhood will we seal it."

"My lord," said the other, with a tremour in his voice, "it is an honour I have not won."

"May it be brotherhood and complete alliance with us."

They were now approaching the marshes, and the sons of Pula urged their horses forward on the lookout for the boats that had brought them thus far on their way to Keffil, a visit they willingly abandoned. Even as they neared the spot, an open space in the water, from which the thick rank growth of weeds had been cleared, a number of black boats, each bearing a party of Pekods, darted from the reeds and approached the shore. The boats were of various sizes and consisted of a framework of reeds covered with bitumen. Men, standing at the head and stern with long poles, rapidly guided or impelled them over the surface of the water.

The larger boat was a barge of honour, spread with carpets and silken cushions, and into it the sons of Pula conducted Talmai, Urman, and Itti-Bel. The oarsmen propelled it vigorously from the shore, the other boats followed in single file. The horses, stripped of incumbrances and led by halters, plunged into the water after the boats and waded or floundered as the water was deep or shallow.*

On nearing the reeds an oblique opening not visible from the shore was observed, and into this the first barge was swept by the adroit steersmen. The movement let them into a broad lane cut through green reeds rising fourteen or fifteen feet above the water. As they progressed, they started up clamorous flocks of flapping water-fowl of the most brilliant plumage. At one moment the sky above them was full of white egrets, the next it was obscured as a flock of black storks took flight, and then there would be a whirring mixture of crimson cranes, white pelicans, pink flamingoes, glossy green-winged ducks, gray geese, golden-tipped swans, and the royal kingfisher with its glistening coat of many colours. At long intervals the voyagers passed the entrances to other

* Layard.

reed-lined lanes leading to distant points in the morass, but, as they were a considerable distance from the city of the Pekods, the water-roads were few.

Near sunset they came to a small island which was a station for fishermen, huntsmen, and buffalo herders. It was decided to remain there over night, and Bani-ya sent forward a courier to inform his father of his whereabouts, and provide for the further transport of the horses.

Talmai, Urman, and the sons of Pula held a long conference, at which the eloquent advocacy of Urman for an alliance among the Aramean tribes completely won over the Pekod princes, who were weary of the long years of peace during which their once warlike people had thrived and grown mercenary. The Gambalians, on the other hand, situated far south of them, and having intimate relations on the east with the Chaldeans, and on the west with the mixed Aramean and Arabian tribes of northwest Arabia, hardly knew the meaning of peace. Theirs was a range of territory which for an hundred years had been a reeking battle-ground, ravaged with fire and sword and repeatedly overwhelmed by the torrent of the arms of every Assyrian king from the time of Sargon. The Gambalians were reduced to comparative poverty by these wars, the Nabatheans decimated and dispersed, and, to break the spirits of the Pekods, Esarhaddon transplanted them to the marshes near Babylon.

"Look not to the Babylonians," said Urman. "Nor more consideration expect than my people received from the Assyrians. Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal waged wars of extermination against the Gambalians, and if we had not the vast mazes and the reedy jungles of the Southland marshes to hide in, there would now be no Gambalians left to tell the tale. The hand of Nergal has lain heavily upon my land. Forget not Sennacherib, who treacherously surprised and defeated the combined forces of our fathers, carrying into captivity two hundred thousand of our people. A herit-

age of hatred have I, for was not the father who begot me, roasted over a furnace by the blood-thirsty Assurbanipal?"

The Gambalian spoke with intense bitterness. His words made a strong impression upon the young Pekods, and ere they sought rest it was resolved to perform the ceremony of blood-brotherhood in the morning before all their followers. This was accomplished at the time set.

Again they put forth in the boats, making direct for the Pekod city. Here and there they passed herds of buffaloes grunting, struggling and splashing among the rushes, and on dry patches of land scarcely above the level of the water they saw droves of swine with their young feeding upon the tender twigs and the bulbous roots of the reed and cane. The lanes through the tall reeds became more numerous and so regular that they resembled streets, and other boats were met, their occupants all bent on some avocation of marsh life. The patches of dry land were noticeably thicker and contained fields of wheat and other grain and orchards of palm and fruit. Presently, with a quick turn of the oars, they were propelled out of the reeds into a wide lagoon, on the other side of which, rising as if by magic power, was a dazzlingly white city with many domes of burnished metal and a pyramidal temple rivalling the rainbow in brilliancy. It was the city of the Pekods, an aggregation of well-built brick houses covered with cream stucco, which, as reflected in the clear waters of the lagoon, had such an ethereal and fairylike aspect that the beholder seeing it for the first time half expected it to float away. In the midst was the palace of Pula, a stronghold surrounded by a deep moat, and approached by a canal leading to the moat. The top of the palace was evidently an open air resort, as there were large spaces between slender columns wherein hung many coloured curtains adjustable to sun or shade.

A crowd had assembled along the canal to welcome home the princes and their guests, and the demonstration

of affectionate regard attested the popularity of the sons of Pula. They quit the boats and proceeded through the city, where the presence of bazaars, warehouses and armories indicated a thriving population. They passed the market-place, which was thronged, and the temple, where the form of worship was similar to that of Babylon. At the entrance to the castle, ranged along the side of a bridge across the moat, stood Pekod warriors clad in linen cuirass, short tunic, and buffalo sandals, some armed with lances, and others with bows and arrows. At the door was Pula, clothed in royal robes of the richest purple. Behind was a retinue of nobles and chief men. As Talmai stepped forward, Pula put his arms around his neck and they embraced.

"Welcome, son of Mathan. Thy servant am I, and all that is mine is thine."

"It is a proud day for me, noble Pula," answered Talmai. "This morning I became thy son by the tie of blood brotherhood."

"It is true, my father," said Bani-ya, but Pula did not wait for this confirmation. He again embraced Talmai with evident joy, and the chief men crowded around to evince their pleasure over the virtual adoption of the Nabathean into their tribe.

"My nobles have I convened, son of Mathan, saying: With my brother Talmai in friendship I am united, as his father with my fathers, in sooth, and with my fathers his fathers."

"With all my true heart I thank thee," responded Talmai.

Pula led them to the reception hall of the palace where royal state was observed upon particular occasions. There the chief himself spread the seat of honour with rugs for Talmai, and slaves brought in ewers of water with which they bathed the feet of the guests; other slaves brought basins for the hands, and still others perfumed them from sprinkling bottles. Then refreshments were brought, and after refreshment there was a long council

in which Talmai unfolded some of his plans, and the Pekods pledged their allegiance to him. Urman was treated with all the honours due his rank, and he felt the keenest delight in what he saw was a momentous victory for the young Nabathean, for the result of the conference was that Pula agreed to send at Talmai's summons 2,000 fighting men, his entire remaining army to be ready for service within a specified time. Urman promised to put afield an equal force and to see that the tribes closely allied with him contributed their quota. Their first object would be the rehabilitation of Mathan, the second the defense of Pekod territory, the third a blow at Assyria if possible.

This matter having been arranged, the next consideration was the safety of Talmai and the Gambalians from pursuit by the Babylonians. Though urged to beware of the risk, Talmai was determined to join Omar in Nineveh, having counselled within his heart that such was the wisest course. The others did not dispute him. Urman wished to return to his territory and prepare for whatever the fates had in store for him. So it was decided that the Pekods should escort Talmai north and Urman south through the marshes to the mainland. In the early morn Urman and his men were in boats going south under the guidance of the younger prince, and Talmai and Itti-Bel, under the guidance of Bani-ya, were in boats going north.

When the sun was only a fourth of its way across the sky the party under Bani-ya came to solid ground, where Talmai and the young prince had an affectionate parting and the Nabathean set forth on Martha, with Itti-Bel on his Babylonian horse, making direct for Sippara on the Euphrates, where they lodged that night. Sippara was a day's journey north of Babylon, and was, for a time, the abiding place of Terah and Abram of Ur on their way to Harran.

Chapter XXI

THE STORY OF ITTI-BEL—THE STRANGER AND THE LIONS

FROM Sippara Talmai and Itti-Bel rode eastward toward Dur-Kurigalzu, the point due north of Babylon whence they turned east to the Tigris. Between Sippara and Babylon was a continuous chain of cities and villages with their temple towers of many colours, their groves of date palms, and their fields of wheat. Gan-Eden, The Garden of Delight, was its name. The plain between the two rivers was equally fertile and populous. When Talmai and Itti-Bel started, the farmers were already in the field, and their monotonous chant, mingling with the shrill morning calls of innumerable birds, made the crisp air melodious, while odours of blossoms, sweet-smelling shrubs, and the fresh-turned soil pleasantly assailed the nostrils. The irrigating season was at its full, and on the high canal banks labourers were taking water from the common ditch and pouring it into private conduits and reservoirs, whence the fructifying fluid spread unto all the fields. They sang as they dipped the long poles on supporting shafts of masonry and turned the dripping buckets. Contentment filled the land.

The horses plodded on through this garden with its open fields and palm-shaded avenues. Talmai was immersed in thought, but with every mile that separated him from Babylon the spirits of Itti-Bel rose, and several times he caught himself humming snatches of the songs of Sappho:

O Hesperus! Thou bringest all things home;
All that the garish day hath scattered wide;
The sheep, the goat, back to the welcome fold;
Thou bringst the child, too, to his mother's side.

"I pray thee, excuse me, my lord," said he, pretending to note an inquiring interest in Talmai's eyes. "'Tis a song written by a Lesbian woman who has a school at Mytilene, not far from my home. Strange heresies she teaches, even that women are no worse than men."

"And of this doctrine what says the sage Itti-Bel?" asked the Nabathean. He observed that the lad's face and hands, that previously had been conspicuously soiled, were now as conspicuously clean, and that he had very handsome features.

"Why, as for that, though our Homer says, 'There is no trust to be placed in women,' I believe in their constancy. In mind I have my sister whose misfortune drove me from my father's roof. Wouldst hear the story, my lord?"

"Tell me the story."

"It is a short, sad one. My sister, Prisca, was, or is, the only daughter of Adrastus and Philinna of Miletus, an Ionian city of the Ægean. Among my father's possessions was a country seat in the hills hard by the Ephesian territory, and adjoining it the estate of an Ephesian named Teleclus. Between the two families was ancient enmity. Now Prisca, walking abroad one day, and not having visited the place for several years, became separated from her attendant and strayed into the thick forest fringing a mountain side. Knowing she would soon be missed and search made for, in thoughtless fancy she wandered where the pine lifted its cones on high. From such dreams as maidens have, she was aroused by a terrifying clamour which of a sudden smote her ears. The fierce baying of hounds, the hoarse grunts of some infuriated animal, and the crashing of underbush, growing louder and louder, formed the hideous discord. With

fear transfixed, Prisca stood facing the direction of the sounds. Soon there dashed into view a huge wild boar with gleaming tusks and foaming mouth. Seeing Prisca, the savage beast swerved and with bristling spine darted toward her."

"Did the boar kill her?" asked Talmai, who was moved by the intensity of Itti-Bel's manner. The lad seemed to see ahead the boar descending upon him; his face had grown pale, and the eyes stared wide open. Then came an abrupt transition, produced by Talmai's question.

"No, my lord," he continued calmly. "Before the boar reached her side a huntsman with the dogs caught and despatched him. It was Cleon, the son of Teleclus, who had saved her. He restored her to her parents and was met with cold thanks. Cleon loved my sister, but love could not heal this blood feud, and when by chance my father learned that his daughter loved the son of his enemy he hurried us back to Miletus and forbade further communication with him."

Itti-Bel paused, and Talmai asked with the impatience of a listener: "And did they meet no more?"

"No, my lord. Her father destined her for one whom she loathed. Her go-between with the son of Teleclus was a peddler who hawked his goods from house to house, and when she received a letter from his hands falsely reading as from Cleon, saying he had determined to wed another, an Ephesian woman, and advising her to obey her parents and marry her cousin, she believed it genuine and it crushed her. Not until the Apaturian festival was the truth revealed, when she was violently upbraided as the cause of the death of the man she was to marry. Little by little, amid the reproaches heaped upon her, was their perfidy laid bare. The messenger had played them false. To Prisca he brought the forged letter from Cleon, and to Cleon he took a forged letter purporting to be from Prisca, proposing that he meet her secretly in the Apaturian grove and carry her away to Ephesus. He had gone to the grove, and under pretence

of attacking him because he was an Ephesian on forbidden ground, our kinsman and his friends had tried to slay him. In self-defence he had killed our cousin and another, and had escaped in his galley to Ephesus.

"Prisca said naught and waited. At the end of a month she received a message from Cleon at Sardis, the city of Alyattes of Lydia. In this he related the circumstances of his compelled flight and asked, if she was still minded to join him, to trust herself to the messenger he sent with the letter. One day when her parents were absent at their estate on the Meander she left with the messenger as guide."

"And heardst thou nothing more of her?"

"Yes, my lord. I followed. At Sardis I learned that the son of Teleclus had been driven from the court before she arrived and departed for Nineveh, for which place she had straightway set forth. Not daring to return to my parents, and ignorant of the danger in the way, I took the road with a guide upon the same journey, a journey of one hundred days at the best speed. Somewhere in the wilderness, where I know not, my guide robbed me as I slept and vanished. To swerve or turn back were as perilous as to go forward and I went forward alone, suffering hunger and distress at times, and frequently finding true and kindly hearts among the poor and simple people. The further I advanced the more dangerous became the way, for the tribes that had once been subject to the rule of Assyria were now free and warring with each other over their boundaries. No sooner had I crossed the Euphrates than a band of Arameans took me prisoner——"

"Of what tribe?"

"The Sukhi they called themselves. They conducted me south to their city of Suru, where I was sold to a Babylonian slave dealer and sent for sale at Babylon. The innkeeper bought me at a ridiculously low price."

Simple as was the story it affected Talmai, who felt

a keen interest in this Prisca, who for love would brave such danger.

"Dost think it probable that thy sister got to Nineveh and found Cleon?" he asked.

Itti-Bel paused before replying. "I believe," said he, "that wheresoever I find Cleon there also will be Prisca."

"In the strangely mixed army that has assembled before Nineveh are thousands of strangers. They have come from the four quarters of the globe. Among them may be the son of Teleclus. We will confide in the wise Omar and seek his advice."

They came to Dur-Kurigalzu early in the day, gained Opis on the Tigris the following day, and, crossing the Tigris, turned northward. They overtook a body of soldiers on the way to the front, and, as there would always be danger of recognition from that source, it was decided to leave the main travelled road along the banks of the Tigris and take one which skirted the base of the Zagros mountains. Houses were remote and garden vegetation was replaced by wild flowers and grasses of many hues, sometimes in scattering splashes of colour, but oftener grouped in solid masses of blue or scarlet, or purple, pink or gold, where particular varieties predominated, such as the anemone, the tulip, the marigold, daisy and mallow, or the white melilotus to which vagrom bees clung. A sybaritic breeze, humid with stolen odours, trailed daintily over the clustered tops which swayed gently as the zephyr passed. Flocks of wild pigeons, doves, blackbirds, and other winged poachers rose and whirred through the air, only to settle again in some place of drowsy ease. Partridges could be heard uttering a call suggestive of warm suns and cool coverts, and the heavy flight of a bustard occasionally startled the horses.

Under the fleckless sky by day, and at night guided by the resplendence of the stars, they rode on. On the sixth day of their course they came to a plain near the

river of Arbela and thence into a wide reach of valley land partly overflowed by the waters of unused ditches. Here a vigorous young growth of reeds had sprung up, overtopping the riders. Trees and brushwood became thicker as they advanced. Talmai, who rode ahead, was peering around for indications of higher and dryer land when the unmistakable roar of a lion, followed by the shouts of a human voice, broke the stillness. The instinct of the hunter overcame thoughts of prudence and he dashed away in the direction of the sounds. As he crashed through reed and bush, he distinguished a commingling of angry roars and snarls of at least two lions with the fierce Babylonian battle cry. To give the man encouragement in the unequal combat, Talmai announced his coming with the ringing halloo of the desert. Plunging through a screen of willows, he came out suddenly upon the scene of combat, an open sandy space, where he beheld a mounted man engaged in a desperate encounter with a pair of lions whose bloody bodies attested his skill as an archer. The lion had fastened his claws in the haunches of the horse and was slowly dragging down that animal, while the lioness crouched for a spring. The hunter was cognizant of his jeopardy, but exhibited no sign of fear, as he stabbed the lion with his long sword and braced himself to meet the spring of the lioness. The appearance of Talmai distracted the attention of the lioness, and her momentary uncertainty gave him the time he needed. Jumping to the ground, he advanced with his lance in position.

The lioness, however, had her quarry located, and answering the hoarse half-smothered roar of her mate with a snarl of rage, she launched herself in the air. Simultaneously the horse, borne down by the weight of the lion on its haunches, reared its head and sank upon its hindquarters, and instead of dropping upon the hunter the lioness pounced upon the upraised throat of the horse, where she clung for the moment. The hunter was precipitated backward over the lion and hardly had

time to steady himself on his feet before he was furiously attacked by it. The lioness shook herself free of the horse and, rising to her feet, was about to fell the hunter with a blow from her enormous paw, when Talmai struck her in the side with his lance, the weapon piercing her heart and coming out behind her shoulder. She dropped heavily to the ground, and Talmai turned to give the man further assistance. It was not needed, as with a powerful stroke of his sword he had cleaved the lion's skull and was coolly wiping the weapon upon the quivering carcass.

"No such pleasure did I anticipate when I left Babylon," said he, and then, glancing at Talmai, he added with a touch of surprise: "Surely thou art not of my party?"

"A chance comer," said Talmai, examining the wounds of the lions. "Am I in the right way to reach Arbela this day?"

"Arbela! Is it so near? Goest thou to Arbela?"

"It was my intention," answered Talmai, cautiously. He saw by the hunter's robe and tunic, short and mud-splashed though they were, that he was a Babylonian of consequence, noble without doubt, and surmised that he was bound for Nineveh.

Tall and vigorous, of Talmai's age, but heavier in flesh, the hunter had a commanding air which was tempered by the customary suavity of his people. Notwithstanding his youth, there were firm, even hard, lines about the mouth, and his eyes, which were set well apart, indicated wonderful power of discrimination. A straight line between them marked an inflexible but just disposition. His hands were large and well moulded, and the muscles amply revealed by his scant hunting tunic were solid from long and persistent exercise. His short, crisp black beard was thin about the mouth, and his hair fell to his shoulders in glistening ringlets. His bracelets were broad gold bands and he wore no other jewelry save the gems in his sword handle and crossbelt.

One of the suite of Nebuchadnezzar, Talmai thought.

The hunter caught his horse, which though terribly gashed was not disabled. Returning to where Talmai stood, he held out his hand.

"Thou hast saved my life," said he very simply. "My hand upon it."

Talmai clasped the hand.

"To whom are my thanks due?" the stranger asked.

"Too slight the service to command thanks," responded the Nabathean, dropping the other's hand. "Thine unaided arm would have brought thee through. I knew not there was such game in this region."

"Yesterday at my camp on the Tigris word was brought by a herder that two lions which had been freed from an Assyrian prince's park by the Medes were killing much sheep and cattle. Ever since have I been hunting for them, and my companions must be in the vicinity. If thou wert bound for Kalah, I would be pleased to have thee join us. Possibly thou art in search of a patron in the army. Thy favour it may be I can return with another."

Talmai was relieved of the necessity of replying by the calls of Itti-Bel, who had become lost in the thicket. He answered, and the lad soon joined them. Not desiring to prolong the interview, the Nabathean mounted his horse.

"I doubt not thy companions will find thee," he said. "My business urges."

"Again I thank thee. If perchance thou notest me at Kalah or before Nineveh I pray thee make thyself known. Never may the evil portent of the city or the country befall thee."

"May it be well with thee also," rejoined Talmai, and he and Itti-Bel left the hunter waiting for his companions.

Chapter XXII

KAK-MERODACH THE POET—THE GATE OF IMGUR-BEL

INTO the city of Imgur-Bel leisurely rode Talmai and Itti-Bel on the afternoon following their halt in Arbela, and here they deemed expedient to remain until morning rather than push on to Kalah, ten miles distant, where Nebuchadnezzar had his headquarters. At Imgur-Bel they would be unknown atoms in the kaleidoscopic population, drawn thither by the siege. The majority of the rightful inhabitants, as in all cities near Nineveh, had been sold into slavery, leaving on the soil only such of the working classes and agriculturists as were necessary utilities to the invaders. The streets swarmed with a motley collection of races, and the spring revelries of many nations imparted a tone of riotous gayety to the little city, which the priests of the temple of Makhir beheld with horror, not because it was riotous, but because strange gods were ostentatiously worshiped in the land of Assur. For politic reasons the temple stood undisturbed, and the loud chants of prayer to the native gods were daily wafted through the great bronze gates whereon Shalmanesar had graved the record of his conquest of the world and his slaughters. In curious contrast with the scenes on the exterior were those within the temple where the far-reaching odours of incense, the rising smoke of swinging censers and burning sacrifice, and solemn processions of white and pink and purple vestmented priests and acolytes presented a spectacle of impressive grandeur, to which the swelling chorus of deeply intoned hymns, the vibrant harmony of harps, and the limpid music of the bugle added an awe-inspiring

power that brought the worshipers within the walls to their knees in ecstatic adoration.

From the abundance of his booty the Babylonian general had provided wine for all comers, and that all might partake of his hospitality the liquid had been poured into tall stone bowls set up at prominent points in the streets. Two of these bowls were in front of the west gate of the temple, which was kept closed, the devotees obtaining admission to the grounds through smaller gates elsewhere. When the Nabathean and his companion came to this street the men and women who had been hovering around the wine like flies about a honey jar were clustered together in front of the closed entrance, where an individual mounted upon an improvised rostrum was haranguing. He held a long ferule in his hand and when not engaged in punctuating his speech by beating the air with it he pointed the rod at the embossed reliefs in horizontal bands on the face of the gate, to which he drew the attention of his hearers. His attire proclaimed him travelling minstrel, one of those errant wights who extracted a precarious but joyful livelihood from the world by their songs, their fables and stories, and frequently by teaching and translating the language of Bel. The laughter, cries of anger, of derision, and shouts of "No! No!" or "Aye! Aye!" which responded to his address were vociferous evidence of his hold upon the auditors.

"Peace and joy," said Itti-Bel to a Babylonian camp-follower who had detached himself from the crowd and was moving away. "What occasions this gathering?"

"Kak-Merodach the son of Eri is talking," he replied, and passed on.

The lad would not confess his ignorance of Kak-Merodach, but rode up to Talmai and gravely laid before him the information.

"Kak-Merodach," repeated Talmai, looking more closely over the heads of the throng, "Yes, 'tis he."

He would have pushed on, hoping to avoid recognition, but the orator's next words, delivered in a loud voice, let him know that he was perceived. He stopped and listened.

"And once there was a proud king of the Arameans, a descendant of Khammurabi and ancient kings who ruled in Babylon in the olden times, who counselled within his heart the freedom of the little patch of earth he was permitted to inhabit with the broken remnant of his people. Where is the royal Mathan to-day? Where is his princely son, Talmai the Two-handed? That hammer of the whole earth, that butcher Assurbanipal, descended upon them, their land he swept like a tempest, the terror of his glory he poured over them, in their royal city he made a massacre, one hundred of his towns did he dig up and burn with fire, pyramids of heads did he erect in their land, their youths and maidens were driven in bonds of iron to Nineveh to become slaves. Mathan with his chariots, his horses, his sons, and his daughters, was captured, and to avert the total extinction of his people he took the royal feet, before Assurbanipal he humbled himself, and to-day his only surviving son, the heir of a thousand kings, with but one attendant is wandering abroad."

Kak-Merodach's voice dropped at the last from the recitative of his oratory to the tone of ordinary conversation as though he were addressing Talmai himself, but Talmai's face betrayed no sign that the speech had affected him. There were angry rumblings of assent among his other hearers, for the picture of conquest and slaughter was familiar to all, whatever the name or clime. The music in the temple, which for a while had been silent as some sacrifice was being offered, suddenly resumed with a fanfare of bugles introducing the joyous strains of harps as the officiating priest announced that the offering was propitious. Then the voices of the male singers were heard chanting a special hymn:

"How long, our lady, shall the strong enemy hold thy land?"

ran the words defiantly distinct.

"He has kindled and poured out fire like hailstones on all the land."

The hymn continued. Those outside were still and listened:

"Our lady, sorely are we fettered by misfortune.
Our lady, thou hast surrounded us and brought us to grief.
The mighty enemy has smitten us down like a single reed.
Let thy heart take rest, let thy disposition be softened!
Weeping, let thy heart take rest:
Let thy heart take rest."

The last notes sobbed out upon the air, with the dying cadence of a solitary trumpet, and strangely stirred the gathering of enemies. With a dramatic gesture Kak-Merodach lifted the long rod to one of the horizontal bands of bronze on the gate, where was inscribed the record of the second Shalmanesar, but the poet, in figurative speech, used the name of the reigning monarch then shut up in Nineveh, and pretended to read on the sculptured portal the record that would be made if that monarch broke the siege and dispersed the allied armies:

Sinsariskun, the great king, the mighty king, king of
the whole world, king of Assyria, king of Elam, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Accad, king of Media, king of Ararat, king of the four regions (he recited).

The king who at the command of Assur, Shamas and Merodach, ruled all nations from the Lower

Sea of the Rising Sun to the Upper Sea of the Rising
Sun and from the most distant lands of Media
to the land of the Nile, from the west to the east,
and from the north to the south the countries
ruled, and exercised kingship over them

In the mightiness of the power of Assur, my lord, against
the lands of Babylonia and Chaldea which had
revolted against Assur, my lord, I marched.
Their whole extent like dust I overwhelmed, their
cities I destroyed, I laid waste, and their great
men in front of their gates on stakes
I impaled, their goods, their spoil, their
stuff, their possessions, their wives, their sons, their
daughters, and their gods I carried away to my
royal city of Nineveh.
I, Sinsariskun the trampler upon the mighty, the
daughters, and their gods I carried away to my
utterly the strong.

"May his food be dust!" broke in a Babylonian.

The cities of the Persians, of Anzan, Media and Ararat I destroyed,
Ararat I destroyed, I laid waste and with fire
I burned. To the lands of distant kings, on
the shore of the upper sea, over difficult
paths and trackless passes whose interior in
former days no king at all had known.
Steep roads, ways unopened I travelled.—

"May all the great gods scatter his race!" groaned an Elamite.

A destruction of those cities I made, their
fighting men in the ravines of the mountain
Into heaps I heaped.
With the blood of their warriors their mountains
like wool I dyed. Cities in them anew
I built, I settled men of Assyria in them.
The worship of Assur, my lord, I established.
I, Sinsariskun, the destroyer, the quick-moving.
The implacable, the deluge of battle.

"May Ahriman seize him at the bridge of the gatherer!" growled a Mede.

"May his food in the place of punishment be poison!" chimed in a Persian.

The kings, the countries, and the cities of the
Upper Euphrates and Tigris, where the waters
gush forth from the mountains, I trod down
as dust, their kings, their
princes, and their great men, captive and
bound, to my city I brought. I flayed them
alive, and their quivering bodies to the
lions I threw.
Sinsariskun, the valiant hero.
The holder of the sceptre unrivalled
Who completes the mission of the supreme gods.

As country after country and city after city were named, and the rod pointed to the imaginary words on the bronze, groans arose here and there from the audience, showing that some inhabitant or citizen had been touched. Toward the last these scattering cries swelled into a chorus, and the tumult increased until it became impossible for the orator to proceed and be heard.

"Ye have not heard the half," he shouted, brandishing the rod. "Ye have not been told how he smote the Gimirra and pursued them into their northern homes of ice and snow—"

"Never," shouted some Cimmerians in the press.

"Aye but he will," continued the orator, accentuating his point with a fierce gesture. "And the Khummukhians on the Euphrates and the Quaians beyond the Amanus."

"May Ardinis ravage his city with fire!"

"He will purify his arms in the Sea of the Setting Sun, he will feast in the halls of Tyre, he will sacrifice on the altars of Sidon, and he will tear down the veil of the temple at Jerusalem!"

"May the curses of Jahveh descend upon him!" exclaimed a deep-voiced Hebrew. "Before his enemies may his corpse be thrown down, may his bones be carried away."

"May Khaldis, with curses four times four, the name of him and the family of him to fire and water consign," added a native of the north, brandishing his bow.

"Cursed be his seed!"

"May he be cursed!" shouted the whole mass as one, shaking aloft their weapons, women's shrill voices rising above the din.

"May the plague demon burn up his land!"

"Curse him with a withering curse!"

"May the fullness of the city ditches be his food in the land whence there is no return," added a Babylonian. "May the waters of the city sewers be his drink!"

"Curse him! Curse him!" they all cried.

"Oh, ye do not want to be sold as slaves, your fathers impaled, your mothers slaughtered, your sons flayed alive, and your wives and daughters violated?" asked Kak-Merodach sarcastically.

"No! No!" From the crowd rose more savage cries.

"Burn!"

"Kill!"

"Sack!"

"Destroy!"

"Pillage!"

"To the temple!" rolled forth a shout in unison. "To the temple!" it was repeated and Kak-Merodach thought

for a moment, as the men and women surged toward a small open entrance, that his control over them was lost.

"Stop!" he called in stentorian tone which was heard despite the din and commotion.

"Hear me, my friends."

"We will," shouted some.

"No! no! To the temple," replied others.

"Beware of the vengeance of the gods," he cried, seizing the opportunity of a momentary hush. The more energetic halted, for none must defy the gods.

"The sacrifice is not prepared, the torch has not been lighted," resumed Kak-Merodach in a deep and impressive voice. The crowd hesitated and turned again to him. "Until the bloody city is ours the hand of vengeance must be stayed, and for the great harvest—prepare, when the streets will run blood, and the Tigris will crimson the salt sea."

There were murmurs in the assemblage.

"Wait," he added slowly and significantly, "until the fall of Nineveh."

"Until the fall of Nineveh!" they roared.

"Nineveh! Nineveh! The bloody city!" screamed the women.

At that moment the solemn music closing the temple service floated out from behind the walls and once again the far-reaching odours in the swinging censers crept through the air.

"Aye, pray to your Assur and your Istar," said Kak-Merodach, bitterly, shaking his fist at the temple.

The crowd laughed derisively.

"And now my friends, we have already neglected the wine bowls too long," and with a gay laugh he jumped lightly to the ground and tossed aside the rod.

"To the wine-bowls!" shouted the crowd. And they broke away in all directions.

"To the wine-bowls!"

Chapter XXIII

AN EVENING OF SONG AND WINE

TALMAI sat immovable while the poet was playing upon the emotions of his auditors. When they dispersed Kak-Merodach came to him with a self-conscious smile irradiating his handsome face.

"The ill-smelling rabble hastened my climax," said he, with unconcealed gratification over his success as an orator. "But let that pass. How fares my princely master of the sands? Whence comes he, and whither goeth?"

"It is well with me," replied the Nabathean. "Though well it may not be if from the high places thou dost proclaim me. From Babylon am I, bound for Nineveh, but my mission is not at once to be made public."

"Fear not, son of Mathan. Nabopalassar buys my services, but not my friendships. Have I not eaten salt with thee at thy father's table, and together have we not chased the lion and wild-ass? Who that knows him does not love the silent Talmai?"

"Good Kak-Merodach!" said Talmai, patting the hand that rested on his horse's shoulder. "Canst find us lodging for the night?"

"Any house in Imgur-Bel, prince, and specifically thou shalt have the best, where fat and goodly food shall be thine, rest and refreshments, with the son of Eri as thy servant."

"If thou art to be my servitor, I command thee to bring thy harp."

"With all my true heart."

"I have with me a young Ionian of Miletus, who charmingly renders his native verse."

"Ah," ejaculated Kak-Merodach turning back and

critically noting Itti-Bel, who had apparelled himself beautifully at Arbela. "Once was I lost in the grove of Artemis at Ephesus, and ever since regretted having found myself."

Itti-Bel blushed vividly.

Kak-Merodach laughed. "Too young is he to know what pleasures he missed when on Ephesus he turned his back. Is he thy slave?"

"He is my friend, son of Eri."

"Ah."

As they went along, Kak-Merodach explained the motive of his presence at Imgur-Bel. The siege of Nineveh had become a long and bloody investment, and a discontented and aggressive minority among the camp followers of the invading armies was agitating a withdrawal of the forces. The soldiers themselves were becoming infected with the spirit of dissatisfaction. Such men as Kak-Merodach were being paid by the kings to go about and artfully counteract this sentiment, and rekindle the fires of hatred.

"Though," he added with pride, "hard did I find it to leave my villa—the villa which for my songs on his wedding day Prince Nebuchadnezzar gave me. However, the king's command knows no gainsaying. Here is the house assigned to me."

He led the way into a portal tunnelled through the side of a pretentious residence built around an open court. Porters pulled apart the iron-studded gates admitting to the court, and all that willing hands and the luxurious accommodations of a mansion could provide was speedily set forth. Then followed the customary bath and refreshment of sleep, and it was the hour of the evening meal before the poet and his guests again met.

"Anxious am I," said Kak-Merodach at table, after his soul had been tranquillised, "to hear a song of Ionia. First, a good luck drink to our young friend."

The ever ready slaves filled their cups, and the poet, politely bowing to Itti-Bel, said:

" May no woman with an unclean hand approach thee."

They drank, and Itti-Bel responded: " If the poor rendering thou wilt pardon, great poet, a song of our Sappho will I sing to the music of thy harp."

The Babylonian ordered his instrument brought, and when Itti-Bel had caught the melody, he sang in a low rich alto this invocation:

Sweet Nereids, grant to me
That home unscathed my brother may return,
And every end for which his soul shall yearn,
Accomplished see!

And thou, immortal Queen,
Blot out the past, that thus his friends may know
Joy, shame his foes—nay rather, let no foe
By us be seen!

And may he have the will
To me, his sister, some regard to show,
To assuage the pain he brought, whose cruel blow
My soul did kill.

Yea, mine, for that ill name
Whose biting edge, to shun the festal throng
Compelling, ceased a while; yet back ere long
To goad us come.

Kak-Merodach enthusiastically praised Itti-Bel's voice, and the spirit of his execution. The lad expressed regret that his poor knowledge of the great poets of his race rendered it impossible for him to cite Homer, Hesiod, Archilochus, Hipponax and Tyrtaeus.

The Babylonian ordered the cups refilled, and gazing at the lad with a curiosity which courtesy forbade utterance, he said: " Here are some lines I learned in Ionia:"

Drink from my cup, Dear! Live my life—be still
Young with my youth! Have one heart, word and will.

One love for both; let one wreath shade our eyes;
Be mad when I am—wise when I am wise.

"I confess," said the poet, after he had drained his cup, "thy minstrelsy is not as a rule pleasing to me, yet the spirit of our own poets has this Sappho, and thy rendition of her lines would not discredit herself. I have met her. She should have been a Babylonian."

"Thou hast met Sappho?" eagerly asked the youth.

"Aye, and Erinna, and Alcaeus too, who has promised to visit me in Babylon, and his brother Antimenides also. Sappho, son of Mathan, is the mistress of a school of poets at Mitylene, and her pupils are women, a statement which would not be believed among many of my countrymen. Alcaeus is her lover, but he has a rival, Phaon, a boatman, mind thee, for whose favour the wealthiest dames of Mitylene would desert their homes. Wert thou ever there, Ionian?"

"No, nor at Ephesus either. Until I left Miletus, never was I farther from my father's home than Mycale."

"Then one libation thou shouldest spill in honour of thy countrywoman."

The slaves refilled their cups and the poet, after the libation, with uplifted cup in hand said, "May trouble never be to her. May she overcome her woes. Gardens of peace and joy of heart may the gods make for her!"

"Are the Ionians fond of poetry, like our Arameans and Babylonians?" asked Talmai, after the ceremony of drinking.

"In truth yes," warmly replied Kak-Merodach. "Though to my mind their poems have not the polish of our verse. There is nothing finer than the description of the war of the Greeks against the Trojans. It was written by a wandering minstrel, Homer of Smyrna. The records tell us that the king of Assyria sent troops to the aid of Troy. But let us to modern things—wine, and love, and song. First the wine. and then I will sing

of Istar, the one great queen, the Goddess of Fifteen, the Mistress of the Evening and the Morning Star."

Again the poet drank. "This is the song," said he, singing in a supplicatory tone, while his fingers barely stirred the strings:

"The light of heaven who blazeth like the fire art thou,
O goddess, when thou fixest thy dwelling place in the earth,
Thou who art strong as the earth!

"Thee, the path of justice approaches thee,
When thou enterest into the house of man.
A hyena who springs to seize the lamb art thou!
A lion who stalks in the midst art thou!

"By day, O virgin, adorn the heaven!
O virgin Istar, adorn the heaven!
Thou who art set as the jewelled circlet of moonstone, adorn the heaven!
Companion of the sun-god, adorn the heaven!"

Pausing for a moment, and changing his note, the singer continued, giving the response of the goddess:

"To cause the gift of light am I appointed, alone am I appointed.
By the side of my father the Moon-god, to cause the gift of light am I appointed.
By the side of my brother the Sun-god to cause the gift of light alone am I appointed.

"My father, Mannaru, has appointed me.
Istar, the mistress of the evening sky am I.
Istar, the mistress of the dawn am I.
Istar, the opener of the bolt of the bright heaven.
My glory extinguishes the heaven, it floods the earth.

The extinguisher of the heaven, the flooder of the earth
is my glory.
That which glows in the clouds of heaven, whose name
is renowned in the world, is my glory.

" As queen of heaven above and below may I be addressed.
My glory sweeps away the mountains.
Thou art the mighty fortress of the mountains, thou art
their mighty bolts, O my glory."

The music at first was a measured cadence, which increased irregularly in intensity, till at the last it was a strong, vibrating triumphant sweep of chords. The tribute of perfect silence was the reward of the singer. It was broken by a deep sigh from behind the curtain separating the banquet room from the interior; then there was a hasty movement of scurrying feet running away from the door. Kak-Merodach laughed pleasantly like a flattered child.

" The slaves," he explained. " They serve me better, I dare say, than they served their late Assyrian lord. Chide them I cannot for their love of music."

" What has become of their master? " asked Itti-Bel.

" Making bricks probably for Prince Nebuchadnezzar," and the poet laughed heartily over the conceit.

" Or repairing roofs in a hostelry," the lad added, glancing with a smile at the Aramean. Talmai lifted his cup, and the three were about to drink, when a servant entered and bowed before Kak-Merodach.

" Speak," commanded the poet.

" An old priest," explained the man, " craves food and shelter for the night, in Merodach's name."

" Then in Merodach's name he shall have it. Show him hither. Drink my friends. Never," continued he addressing Talmai, " may the breath of those who work charms among men approach thee. May Zarpanit, the princess, the supreme, assist the prince to his sovereignty."

Talmai felt a momentary uneasiness at the mention of the word priest, but considering that it was nothing unusual for these people, wandering here and there on their missions, to ask shelter wherever night found them, he dismissed a suspicion and gazed intently at the man who just then entered. Kak-Merodach gave his guest a respectful salutation. The night air, which at this season was biting, had pinched the new comer's face, and his limbs shook with fatigue.

" May the gods look favourably upon this house and the place of their gathering become thy home," said he, while the slaves were attending him. " The music of thy harp did draw me."

His harsh voice belied the courtesy of his words, a harshness due probably to many years of incessant chanting in the temple service.

" Holy shepherd, thou art welcome," answered Kak-Merodach. " This house and all that is in it is thine."

The priest weariedly seated himself at the far end of the table, but scarcely touched the food that was placed before him, and as the conversation drifted on between the rapidly increasing toasts of Kak-Merodach, his head sank lower and lower until it was almost hidden in the folds of his gray robe. As a hound trained not to touch certain game instinctively follows it with his eyes, so did Talmai watch the priest. At a point in the talk, he saw his garment move, and the folds fall away into an arrangement which allowed the priest to gaze from behind them. Kak-Merodach had been asking the Nabathean if he felt no curiosity to learn how it was that he, a distant Babylonian, should be familiar with his family history.

Talmai was slow in replying. " There are many things permitted thee to know, son of Eri," he finally said. " These are matters my father will communicate to me in his time."

" Knowest thou not thine own ancestry? " asked Kak-Merodach in surprise.

"All in good time, my royal historiographer," said Talmai, desirous of changing the subject. Kak-Merodach had drunk too heartily to observe fine distinctions.

"Why," exclaimed he, "knowest thou not thou hast a fairer title to the throne of Babylon than Nabopalassar himself?"

"I know it not," answered Talmai, and it was then he noticed the movement of the priest's robe which warned him that the old man was listening. "Those are affairs of my father."

An increasing coldness in the Aramean's tone of voice had no effect on the Babylonian, if indeed he noticed it.

"Son by son," said he with solemnity to impress his meaning, "thou art a direct descendant of the great Khammurabi, the king of Sumer and Accad, who drove out the Elamites, and made Babylon forever the city of the great king."

If Kak-Merodach had expected to create a sensation by his announcement, he was disappointed. Talmai remained silent, though well aware of the weight of the words; Itti-Bel knew nothing more of their import than that his master and friend was of loftier lineage than he had supposed. The priest thrust his head partly through the protecting hood of his robe and fastened his brilliant eyes upon the young man. Then, like a turtle, he drew within himself again.

"And who was this Khammurabi, whose memory is thus overwhelming?" asked Itti-Bel.

"Ah, a stranger art thou, else thou wouldst not ask," rejoined Kak-Merodach. "May his name be long in the land!" and he emptied his cup again. "First was he to unite all the nations of the two rivers into one people, with one great god and one royal master. Fifteen hundred years ago was this, our records inform us, Ionian, long before the land of Assur or a king of Assyria existed. In Babylon, his grandest monument, the Temple of Bel itself, you daily behold. Before his day it was but a poor dwelling place for the god. He enlarged it to its present

dimension, and the image of the god which sits in the upper chamber is his gift—aye, even the great ruby which rests upon the breast of the god."

Talmai noticed a tremulous agitation of the priest's robe. "Never have I been in the temple," said he, furtively watching the priest, "nor do I know the image or the ruby. Is the gem of great value?"

Kak-Merodach emptied his cup.

"It is without price. The Amulet of Bel it is called. Of all the world, but two persons may possess it without being blasted by the great god's curse. Thou, son of Mathan, and thy father are the two."

"A ruby sayest thou?" queried Itti-Bel.

"A ruby, Ionian, though if tradition be true, it is part of what once was a greater stone, the half of which was a ruby and the half a sapphire. Of a truth there is a glint of blue on an end. On it are characters engraved so fine, that by a magnifying lens alone may they be traced. The writing is in a strange language, which no priest that ever came to Babylon could interpret. Equally obscure is the fate of the sapphire, albeit that as an heirloom it is known to have descended to the sons of Khammurabi through centuries. After the time of Samsutana, the last of the race of Khammurabi on the throne of Babylon, it became lost to the knowledge of men. Here, slave," he exclaimed angrily. "Seest thou not my cup is empty?"

"Thou art not drinking, my prince of mystery and silence," he continued, "nor thou, Ionian. Well, I will drink for the three. May the gods of heaven and earth say unto thee, 'Be at rest.' Of what were we talking?"

"Of the Amulet of Bel," answered Itti-Bel.

"Have I not told ye? When next thou dost visit Babylon, son of Mathan, make the holy pilgrimage to the upper temple of E-Sagil and behold the Amulet. The priest here can tell thee of it. Ho there, Shepherd," said he, turning suddenly on the silent figure. "Art thou of the house of the great god Bel?"

"Of the house of Ea of Eridu am I, my children," responded the priest, letting his robe fall from his face. "Well do I know the Amulet. What thou hast said is truth, except in that one of the house of Khammurabi from the vengeance of the god is exempt."

The harsh voice of the old man fell discordantly upon their ears.

"And the sapphire? what knowledge of it has the priesthood?" inquired Kak-Merodach.

"It is not a gem blessed of the great gods. Certain Gambalians and Nabatheans tell of a Blue Stone preserved by the head of their royal house, but it comes not within the purview of the vassals of the great gods."

"Ah," murmured Kak-Merodach, darting a keen look at Talmai. "Thou sayst, shepherd, that not even is a descendant of Khammurabi exempt from the curse?"

"The awful curse of Mamit would fall upon the mortal laying desecrating hands upon the Amulet," sternly answered the priest. "But I am weary, my children," he added, "the night grows."

Again he folded his robe about his face and sank into a repose which might have been sleep.

"Thou, too, son of Mathan, and our Ionian must be weary," said the Babylonian. "I know not thy mission, my friend, nor inquire, but whatever it be, may the directing god, the messenger who loves thee, direct thy way. May the glory of thy ambition be established for thee. Ionian, may our divine lady long extend to thee life and goodness of heart."

Directing the servants to show Talmai and Itti-Bel to chambers, the poet accepted their good wishes, and when they had gone he returned to the table, and with wine and harp attained a state of beatific unconsciousness.

Chapter XXIV

NEBUCHADNEZZAR—AN ARREST AND RECOGNITION

THERE were three horses ready for riders in the court of the poet's house next morning. Itti-Bel opined the third must be for the priest, but the appearance of Kak-Merodach attired for a journey explained the intended use of the animal.

"My heart wearieth of this place," said he, when Talmai came forth. "Ready enough are these barbarians for bloody deeds, and if it pleaseth thee, Nabathean, I will ride with thee part of the way."

"It does indeed please me," warmly responded Talmai, adding: "The confederacy against Nineveh must be weakening when men like thee are called from their ease to strengthen the hands of the allied kings."

"Occasion given, many of the nations would, like oil between our fingers, slip away and vanish to their homes. The gold of Assyria is powerful, though her arms be not. 'Twas but yesterday two emissaries of the Assyrians in this camp were betrayed to us. They are to be fed to the lions this morning."

Their horses parted, to allow a chariot to pass them in the narrow street, and nothing more was said until they came to a very large octagonal structure, the casing of which was in alternate layers and broad panels of painted brickwork. Men stood about and passed in and out, and the sun glistened on its glazed and gaudy surface and gradined coping.

"It is the pit of punishment," explained Kak-Merodach. "Wouldst view the interior?"

Talmai assented, but Itti-Bel requested permission to

remain outside, and, surrendering their horses to the lad, the poet and Nabathean entered one of the eight inlets, four of which had ascending and four descending stairs. They ascended, and on emerging from the stairs found themselves in a middle tier of an amphitheatre with an excavated arena or pit. Though the seats were packed with spectators, no sound broke the pregnant silence. All gazed with fascinated eyes upon an object in the centre of the pit. A man on his back it was, with an iron cage closely fitted to his body, save his bare arms and legs. The legs were shackled, the arms were free and twitched spasmodically. A sense of something lacking puzzled the onlooker until he perceived that the hands were missing.

A Babylonian behind Kak-Merodach plucked him by the sleeve and made room for the poet and his companion on the bench beside him.

"Late art thou, son of Eri," whispered he, half in apology, half in reproach. "Already has one traitor been flayed and devoured and the lions driven back into their dens."

A herald, rising, blew a long blast with a trumpet. "Lo, ye of the nations," he proclaimed, "behold the fate of a traitor."

The trumpet and the words galvanised the throng. There was a quick movement of the shoulders, a quick uplifting of heads, and the answering cry broke forth: "Death to the traitor!"

The trumpet and the words were heard also by the caged prisoner. He writhed his shackled legs and frantically waved the black cauterised stumps of his arms, as if in appeal for mercy, and to show what he had already endured. Move his body he could not, and he was without tongue.

The sight inflamed rather than softened the spectators. "Summon thy god Assur to thy aid!" they cried. "Thy wings are clipped, lover of Assyria!"

"Loose the lions! Loose the lions!"

In the midst of the demonstration a sharp click was heard.

Instantly there was silence, all scanning expectantly the barred holes in the wall of the pit.

In the stillness was heard another click, followed by the creak of rusty iron.

One of the eight barred gates moved slowly upward and out of the darkness beyond partly emerged a lioness. The sunlight dazzled her, and for a second, one foot aloft, she halted, her eyes blinking; she recognised the ring and its customary fringe of humanity and stepped forth. From behind her dashed out two spotted whelps.

The lioness was lean from suckling, but she was still licking her chops of recent food, and her paunch embossed her lank sides.

The whelps, biting and snarling at each other, ran heedlessly forward and fell over the legs protruding from the cage, which twitched impotently. The lioness stopped, showed her teeth and swayed her tail. On seeing that her young had suffered no harm she lowered her head and eyed the curious thing.

The prisoner's legs were rigid. He feared to arouse the mother. The lioness winked her eyes sleepily, yawned and lazily stretched herself upon the ground. Lounging thus, with half closed eyes, she watched over her whelps.

The cubs, with many a backward dart and crouching approach, came again to the legs. Satisfied that they were harmless, the little animals resumed their play, joyously tumbling about the round, white flesh, using it as an ambush from which to spring at each other.

The people on the benches made wagers on the length of the man's life, and the eventual manner of his death. Would he lie there in safety until the lioness grew hungry? Would some action of his own precipitate the crisis?

In their gambollings the whelps came upon the blackened stump of one of the arms. There was dry blood on the wrist and, wondering, they ceased their play and licked

it, tenderly, at first, then with tenacious haste. They began to lash their tails, and growled menacingly.

The man was seen to wince. His body writhed, and losing control of his muscles, he violently hurled the whelps aside. The lioness sprang to her feet and with a terrible roar threw herself upon the cage. The bars shook, but remained intact. She bit viciously at them. The whelps returned to the arm and she ceased her own efforts and watched them with a new interest. The man beat them back, but their playful mood had vanished, and they fell upon the arm with savage snarls, tearing at the flesh with teeth and claws. Blood began to flow freely, and they eagerly lapped up the fluid.

The spectators bent their heads together and whispered excitedly of their bets.

The savour of blood assailed the nostrils of the lioness. Her ears stiffened and she sniffed in the air. Then with a short roar she swept her young away and buried her teeth in the flesh. The little ones scrambled back and at once the three, snarling, spitting and growling, fastened upon the bleeding member. The mother gave the arm a wrench and tearing it loose from the body ran to the entrance of her den. The bars were down, and squatting there she savagely devoured the bloody fragment.

The whelps attacked the other arm.

" Suffer me to depart," said Talmai. " I can find pleasure in other things."

" I will go with thee," replied Kak-Merodach, and they left the pit of punishment.

Even in a time of disorder and turmoil, the morning canter from Imgur-Bel to Kalah was full of pleasantness, and for Talmai, Itti-Bel, and Kak-Merodach it was a delightful diversion. Far from the humid lowlands of Babylon, with snow-capped mountains east and north of them, the cool air had a tonic quality that stimulated riders and animals. The horses dashed down the broad stone highway, into which the tributary roads were already emptying their streams of traffic. Men, women, and children in-

haled the joyousness of early day, and cheerful greetings, gay quips, and merry songs were heard, and the world moved on. The fruitful land bore on its face fewer scars than might have been supposed. Armies must live, and this part of the conquered territory, being easily patrolled, was cultivated by the conquerors with the labour of enslaved natives for the benefit of the military commissariat. The emerald grain was waist high, fruit trees had thrown out their banners of pink, and white, and red, and the poplars, acacias, and willows were clothing themselves in the tenderest, shyest green. Volunteer flowers in garden and field not only coloured the ground, but fed the air with their aroma. The same scenes of agricultural activity that were visible in Babylon prevailed here, but the rank growth of reeds in the canals and laterals evinced the absence of governmental supervision. The crops were for the day, not for the granaries.

"Ah, this is like new wine," exclaimed Kak-Merodach, when they drew rein after a brisk run. "It lacks only sand and a thirst."

Itti-Bel laughed long and gayly over this remark. The youth's beauty and delicacy seemed to grow more striking with each day's journey. His spirits were higher, his laughter oftener.

"Laugh on, Ionian," the poet remarked in his cheerful way. "I observed thou didst not handle the cup with the graceful freedom of thy countrymen. Laugh, and if when the day is done thou canst not laugh, the gainer thou wilt be for having laughed. For me the never failing incantation for laughter is the sound of wine trickling down my throat."

"Pray thou then that the allies have not closed the wine shops of Kalah," rejoined Itti-Bel. "The wherewithal have I for an incantation."

"Nobly said, my boy. In thy speech is an Ionic flavour, which commends it to my ear."

"What of the priest that was with us last night?" abruptly asked Talmai.

"Oh, the priest," mused the poet, "the priest—I suppose he left ere we departed, son of Mathan. In Kalah wouldst thou have been ere this hadst thou not politely remained to bid me farewell, and had I not politely determined to go with thee."

With pleasant sayings from the poet, and occasionally a song from the Ionian, they continued, and it was high day when they approached the ancient capital of the Assyrian empire. Here were the headquarters of the Babylonian army and its immediate allies and mercenaries, the Medes having selected Dur-Sarginu, the City of Sargon. Kalah was eighteen miles south of Nineveh, and Dur-Sarginu was eleven miles northeast of the capital, and these two points were the bases of supply for a cincture of earthworks around the besieged city. Of the three successive capitals of the successive Assyrian hierarchy, kingdom and empire, Kalah was second, and though Nineveh ultimately became the capital, Kalah remained to the time of its capture by the Babylonians and Medes, a place of residence of the Assyrian kings, a fact which was amply attested by the palaces they built there. All these palaces, and two temples besides, were erected upon one great artificial platform or mound, forty feet high, sixty acres upon the top, and extending for more than a third of a mile along the Tigris river. Palace after palace rose on its lofty platform, rich with carved woodwork, gilding, painting, sculpture, and enamel, each aiming to outshine its predecessors, while stone lions, sphinxes, obelisks, shrines and temple-towers embellished the scene, breaking its monotonous sameness by variety. The lofty ziggurat attached to the temple of Nin, dominating over the whole, gave unity to the vast mass of palatial and sacred edifices. The Tigris, skirting the entire western base of the mound, glassed the whole in its waves, and, doubling the apparent height, rendered less observable the chief weakness of the architecture.* The city wall

* Rawlinson.

was 120 feet in height, and was strengthened with towers along its whole course.

Nebuchadnezzar and his princess, unattended save by their mute parasol bearers, were taking the air upon the royal mound of Kalah at the hour that Talmai, Kak-Merodach and Itti-Bel rode into the crowded square fronting the palace. From the parapet the prince and his bride could view the stirring scenes transpiring below and in the confusion of sounds catch scraps of conversation which must have been highly diverting to Amytis, to whom harem life was exceedingly irksome. Their place of promenade was an open space well removed from the palace walls and the head of the street stairs. Though none might approach them uninvited, many eyes followed the red and white parasol which shielded the couple. The dark, strong, forceful face of the young Babylonian was in marked contrast to the delicate lilylike beauty of the fair Mede.

"It is refreshment to the heart, my prince, to view the mountains, even from afar," Amytis said to her husband, pointing to the white line along the eastern and northern horizons. "I beg the favour of thy presence at a banquet this evening to meet my father the king."

"I will come with cheerfulness. There will be quiet moments when the king and I may confer over many matters requiring joint consideration."

Amytis detected an unfriendly tone underlying the remark, and hastened to add:

"Well aware, am I, my lord, of the differences between our people, but between thee and my noble father are none. He is like-minded with thee in all things noble."

"True, my dove, and thus it is we are hopeful of capturing the bloody city. Mine officers report a savage encounter by a company of Medes and a company of Babylonians, in which four men were wounded, and over what thinkst thou?"

"The divining power of the priests?"

"No, not this time, nor because a Babylonian dog-hater

stoned one of the curs that hang around the Median tents. They quarrelled over whether I or thy father should retain the head of king Sin-sar-iskun after capture."

The princess laughed. "Thou carest not for the trophy, nor does my father. But what excitement is yonder, my lord?"

"Probably a soldier beating a tradesman for a false balance," ventured the prince, scarcely glancing in the direction indicated.

"Soldiers there are in the crowd, and a priest, around three men on horses."

To please her Nebuchadnezzar feigned interest.

"They are making an arrest," said he. "The priest is excited. The men must have committed sacrilege. Ah," he ejaculated, with real interest, leaning over the parapet and looking with shaded eyes at the group, which was too far off to permit their hearing the words of the priest. "I know that figure."

"Who, my lord?"

"Thou shalt hear." Turning toward the guard at the stairs the prince beckoned to one of the officers. whom he commanded:

"Bring before me yon men on horseback and the priest."

The man saluted, turned, and ran back to the guard, and presently was seen making his way with other soldiers down the long stairs which led alongside of the wall to the street.

Amytis was watching the hubbub. "Surely they will not attempt to resist," she said, "the soldiers outnumber them fifty to one. No, one is talking. Look, my lord," she exclaimed, "it is our poet Kak-Merodach."

"It is as thou sayest. But my guardsmen are there. The heart of the priest is enraged. Of what noble carriage is the man on the Arabian!"

"They are dismounting. One is a boy. Observe, my lord how white is his face. Their weapons are taken from them. They are coming."

"THIS PRIEST, MY LORD, IS THE ACCUSER."—*Page 199.*

"They tell a pretty tale of the poet Kak-Merodach," said the prince, to amuse his bride while they waited.

"Pray what is it, my lord?" she asked.

"It chanced that he was journeying in the hot season at the hour of noon. Weariness and drowsiness overtook him, and he laid down a little way above the road. While he slept, bees to him flew and plastered honey on his lips Such was the beginning of his career of song." *

"I pray thee Nebuchadnezzar to hold in mind that he was the poet of our nuptials."

"From the mountains he brought her,
A woman fashioned for a mother beautiful."

Thus hummed Nebuchadnezzar, reciting two lines of that poem, and Amytis blushed rosily.

The prisoners and their guards now advanced toward them from the head of the stairs. The men under arrest were Talmai, Kak-Merodach and Itti-Bel, and the priest by his dress proclaimed himself to be a shatammu, a high functionary of the financial department of the priesthood. The prisoners had been informed that they were to be taken before Nebuchadnezzar. Judge, therefore, the Aramean's amazement when he recognised in Nebuchadnezzar the lion hunter whom he had rescued near Arbela.

They saluted the prince with upraised hands. The princess they might not salute uninvited.

"What accusation is brought against these men, and who accuses?" asked Nebuchadnezzar.

"This priest, my lord, is the accuser," answered the officer. "He refuses to make known his charge, but demands in the name of Bel and by the authority of Kharmes, the high priest, that they be delivered unto him."

"Stand aside," Nebuchadnezzar said to the guards, who withdrew out of hearing. "Speak, priest."

"The officer, my lord, has said it. In the name and by the authority of the ishshakku-ziru I demand them."

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* Pausanias on Pindar.

There was a decisiveness in the priest's tone which grated upon Nebuchadnezzar, though his face remained inscrutable.

"Tell thy master, the great priest, that the lives of the people is the king's care," said he, motioning for the shatammu to retire.

The priest with an effort restrained himself. "The son of Nabopalassar forgets himself. These men are claimed by Bel and Khar-mes."

Nebuchadnezzar gazed at him coldly.

"Under King Nabopalassar the law is supreme. Begone."

The wrath of the priest could not be restrained. "Beware, Chaldean, of trifling with the gods. I accuse this Aramean of infamous sacrilege——"

"Enough," said Nebuchadnezzar, signalling the captain of the guard.

The shatammu was trembling with the violence of his rage, when he felt a large, powerful hand upon his shoulder. The captain of the guard, massive, magnificent, towered above him. Before he could utter the expostulations which clogged his tongue he was hurled into the arms of a soldier, while another threw a cloak over his head, and the two forcibly dragged him out of sight and to a swift execution.

"Whither goest thou, my friend of the lions?" Nebuchadnezzar asked Talmai, thereby indicating that he recognised him.

"It is my wish to enter Nineveh, my lord."

"Nineveh!"

"Not as thine enemy, my lord."

The announcement, however, was evidently distasteful to Nebuchadnezzar.

"The son of Nabopalassar cannot afford to have a debt," he responded. "And thou poet, whither?"

"By our gracious Istar, until this moment I knew not. A sojourn in Nineveh at this time would be of value to me when my poem describing its fall and the valour of our

prince Nebuchadnezzar is written," answered Kak-Merodach. Then he added, reflectively: "I hope our enemies have not consumed all the wine."

Aware of the poet's habits, Nebuchadnezzar smiled.

"And thou, my pretty lad?" he asked of Itti-Bel.

"Whither my lord goes, go I."

"Restore their weapons, guard."

Amytis touched his sleeve. "I would speak with this lad," said she.

Itti-Bel held back, but the imperative woman summoned him, and the two walked aside. The interruption was credited by the beholders to the Median manners of the princess, a species of independence which pleased her lord and master more than it displeased. He gazed admiringly at the trim figure of the youth. When the short conference ended Itti-Bel, evidently very much crestfallen, rejoined his companions. Nebuchadnezzar beckoned to the captain of the guard.

"Conduct these, my friends, under the protection of my standard, to the gate of Nineveh. Take a company of soldiers and allow no one to stop them until they disappear within the portal. If they are refused entrance, return them here. On thy head be their safety."

"May there be peace to the prince, my lord," said Kak-Merodach and Talmai. They once more saluted and turned away with the officer.

"A poor Ionian youth, my prince," said Amytis in explanation. "An unfortunate lad who should be under his father's roof-tree."

"He has a noble master. Two days ago the Aramean saved my life."

"The companion of thy lion adventure!"

"The same."

"Oh that I had known it. Canst not thou send this chain to him as a remembrance of my gratitude?"

"Not now, my dove, not now."

Chapter XXV

THE INN OF THE URARTAN—IN THE ALLEY OF ACACIAS

THE Babylonian captain conducted his three charges to the head of the northern stairs of the mound, where was an altar and circular stone seat. Here he invited them to rest, while he got together his men and had the horses brought up.

To come thus to a view of all within the high walls of the city was like lifting the lid off a titanic flat-bottomed pot and inspecting the interior, though all here was alive with vivid colouring. The enclosed space could not have exceeded a thousand acres, and straight, narrow streets cut it up into right angled blocks of brilliantly stuccoed houses with conical or flat roofs. It was merely the commercial and official centre of the dense population that dwelt without the walls.

The officer returned with his men. They were light-armed spearmen of the Prince's Guard. Each wore a polished metal casque, from which depended a curtain of flexible iron and copper, protecting the chin, neck, ears, and back of head. Under a white cloak, worn negligently and held on the shoulders by a thin metal chain, was a shirt of mail, composed of burnished iron embossed in copper, with figures and fanciful ornamentation. In the case of the captain the inlaying was of gold. Their tunic was blue, and the legs were covered with blue greaves connecting with sandals of the same colour. Each man carried an oval wickerwork shield covered with ox hide, a short spear, a sword in his cross belt, and a dagger in his girdle.

The captain—Rimut, the son of the Urartan, was his

designation—said that they would proceed at once, spending the night where darkness overtook them.

Kak-Merodach grumbled.

"Why not," said he, "stop here in Kalah for the night. There is not a decent wine shop on the entire road."

They were descending the stairs to the street.

"In error art thou, son of Eri," replied the soldier. "Half way, on the rising ground separating Nineveh and Kalah, is a hostelry kept by an old Urartan, who has a rare brand of white wine, in which there lurks the spirit of the mountains of the gods. My father, who was in king Nabopalassar's service when he was viceroy of Babylon, came from Urartu, and this inn-keeper know I well."

"Soldier," remarked the poet, gazing with admiration on the captain, who was taller than the ordinary Babylonian, "in thee I observed an air of superiority when first I beheld thee. To this excellent inn-keeper will we hasten."

After all had mounted, Kak-Merodach continued:

"Often have I heard questioned the entire wisdom of the gods, but though somewhat prone to scoff, always have I been brought back to the worship of my ancestors by some signal providence. Here, when I doubted the existence of good wine in all the dreary journey to our destination, our noble captain tells us there is a rare vintage of the Urartan white awaiting us. Ah, here is a wine-house, and these poor soldiers on foot have a long march before them. Let us offer a libation to Adar, who maketh wine to be good."

Calling forth the keeper of the place, Kak-Merodach saw that each guardsman was supplied with the drink he preferred. Some took the red wine of the grape, as did he, more had date beer, others palm wine, while a few took the spiced wine of the pomegranate or the citron.

While they were thus engaged, a closed travelling carriage drawn by powerful Susianian mules, drove past and went but a short distance when it stopped. The elaborate and costly trappings indicated its owner to be a person

of wealth. A slave sitting with the driver descended to the ground and, after a brief colloquy with the occupant of the carriage, walked back to where Kak-Merodach stood and, bowing, said to the poet:

"Honoured Babylonian, my mistress begs a word with thee."

Kak-Merodach excused himself to his companions, and Rimut detailed five of his spearmen to accompany him. The captain's instructions were to escort the three men in his charge to the gates of Nineveh and remain with them until they disappeared within the portal of the city.

The poet held a brief but animated conversation with the inmate of the carriage, during which his face was wreathed in smiles. Then he rejoined his comrades, and the carriage drove on.

"Some chance, I know not what," Kak-Merodach explained to his friends and the captain, "brings here the most celebrated of Babylon's mistresses of pleasure, the lady Harimtu."

"Harimtu!" repeated Talmai.

"Yes. She will lodge where we stop to-night, with her steward and a retinue, which augurs well for the evening."

Talmai contented himself with an odd smile. The captain of the guard gave the word, and they resumed their journey.

Talmai closely scrutinised the Babylonian soldiery they encountered. He was informed by rumour of the changes for the betterment of the force introduced by Nabopalassar, based on the Assyrian system. The centuries of subjugation to that power had robbed the Babylonians of a vital force in warfare, the habit of victory. In the twenty years of his kingship Nabopalassar had reorganised the army of which Prince Nebuchadnezzar was now in command. Its future was in his hands. Talmai saw its elements. Charioteers, cavalrymen, spearmen, archers, slingers, and also pioneers, miners, and sappers he saw at one time or another on his way, and noted every feature

of accoutrement and bearing. His conclusion was that he beheld a powerful and effective engine of conquest.

In due time they arrived at the inn mentioned by Rimut, where there was accommodation of some sort for all. Kak-Merodach ascertained that Harimtu and her steward Barak were there, though the steward had made himself invisible to the inmates of the place soon after his arrival. Talmai surmised from this that Barak had seen and recognised him in passing and meant to keep out of sight. He anticipated trouble from both Barak and the priest.

Kak-Merodach observed his manner. "A poor prophet, he who could not predict bloodshed before another sunset," he remarked jocularly.

Talmai laid his hand affectionately on the poet's shoulder.

"Right art thou, son of Eri. I ask thee in friendship to abandon thy intention of accompanying me."

"No," stoutly responded the Babylonian. "Danger together we have faced as friends and comrades—didst thou ever find me a coward?"

"Never."

"It is my whim to go into Nineveh. How thou wilt enter her jealously guarded gate I know not, but with thee will I go. Besides, a suspicion have I that this captain of ours will throw me from a catapult over the wall unless I consent to enter through the gate."

They were interrupted by the slave, who accosted Kak-Merodach in Kalah with an invitation from Harimtu for the poet to join her.

"From this woman accept no invitation for me or the Ionian," Talmai cautioned Kak-Merodach.

The poet bowed acquiescence and followed the slave.

Talmai saw no more of Kak-Merodach that evening, though the sounds of his music could be heard at times throughout the inn and the great open court. The weather was clear and cool, and the brilliant orb of the moon was beginning to wane. In the open court the soldiers, travellers, and other wayfarers lit fires of aromatic twigs, around

which they hovered, and listened with awe to tales of travel and adventure, spiced with supernatural and miraculous episodes. At intervals itinerant musicians played dreamy airs, or singers sang of love.

Imbued with a spirit of restlessness, and desirous of solitude, Talmai, along in the first watch of the night, strolled out of the inn precinct and moved slowly down an avenue of acacias near by. But for the long rasping noise of the cicada and a mysterious movement among the trees which silence itself broods, the night and the air were still. Relieving himself of present care the young man gave full play to tender thoughts of Sherah, the Jewess. He recalled the scene of their first meeting in the moon-lit streets of the city of beautiful women, of their long ride to the depot at the Ford of the Rising Sun, and of the few hours in the scented garden. Talmai had seen more of life than the ordinary Aramean. He had visited many cities between the Euphrates and the Nile, his instructors had been Hebrew and Aramean teachers of wide experience, and in the schools of Damascus he had learned much besides that which was set before him to study. What he knew and of what ignorant, however, probably no one ever gauged. He was reserved by nature, and his political condition and mode of life deepened this characteristic. He was modest, yet profoundly impressed with his importance as the head after his father of his tribe. Possessing enormous strength, the perfect use of both hands, and being a hardy, bold, and yet not reckless hunter and warrior, he estimated his own skill and prowess in high ratio. In all things he was generous and unselfish, and, when not in the passion of battle, possessed a lofty and magnanimous spirit.

Thinking still of Sherah, he walked on until the increasing chill in the air warned him of the lateness of the hour. He started back to the inn at the same leisurely pace through the densely shadowed alley. A slight rustling among the leaves and an irregular swaying of

the tree tops betokened a soft breeze coming up from the lower reaches of the river.

Talmai was deeply absorbed in his thoughts, or he must surely have heard a rustling that was not caused by the wind, and a catlike tread behind him. May not a man love and retain his senses?

With the spring of a panther the creeping object was upon him, a heavy cloak was swished over his head, and he was jerked violently backward. Taken by surprise and overmatched in weight, yet the Aramean struggled to maintain his footing. His hands were pinioned, however, by the cloak, and, though he swerved and swayed in an endeavour to twist out of his assailant's grasp, the bulk of the man dragged him down until his balance was lost. He fell prone, with the attacker on top.

Although partly stunned and muffled, Talmai was conscious of what was transpiring. With his ear so near the ground, he heard running feet approaching, not two but four, and the hum of voices speaking with repressed excitement. He struggled until he felt the pressure of two more bodies. He felt bonds tighten around him and the cloak over his head almost suffocated him. Nervous, energetic fingers explored the region of his waist in search of something on his person. Impatiently they fumbled under the circumbinding cloak. Talmai mentally followed every turn. Was it his weapons they sought? No, they passed by the handles. Was it the gold he had within his robe? He was in doubt. The intruding fingers loosened the folds of the cloak a little. Talmai breathed easier, but his hands remained tightly bound. Evidently his life was not in immediate danger, or he would have been stabbed ere this. He could hear a word or two of the few spoken.

"It, it," was reiterated. Then—"Hast found it?" in a husky whisper.

Oh, for one free sweep of the arm! thought Talmai. Every muscle was quivering in anticipation of the op-

portunity for a gigantic effort. His mind was no longer clouded by love.

The man whose hand was exploring his tunic was light—as light as a feather it seemed to the Nabathean. The man at his head, burdening his shoulders, was not heavy, but the one sitting across his legs, the one who first attacked him, was of great weight.

"He wears a shirt of mail," the searcher said.

Where had he heard that voice?

Harsh, crabbed, wormwood-laden.

At Imgur-Bel.

The old priest!

Was there to be no chance, no opportunity for release?

"It covers his heart but not his throat." The tone was of caustic hatred. The man at his head spoke. Where, Talmai, didst hear that voice before? The scene flashed into memory: an armory, a little, dark old man surrounded by his weapons, and the glowering face of Barak the steward!

Thus Talmai recognised two of his assailants.

Was the opening never to come?

"If thou dost not wish to kill," said the priest, in his acrid tone, "give him air else his spirit will escape thy knife. All I ask is that which I seek."

Barak grudgingly loosened the folds of the cloak about the head.

The priest moved, Barak moved, the man on his legs moved. Talmai had remained so still that their muscles had involuntarily relaxed, as a bow constantly bent loses its resiliency.

Is this the chance?

Of what use is that strength with which nature gifted thee Talmai?

'Tis the chance.

Talmai knew it, felt it, and the blood flew to his heart and then back to his limbs.

The loosening of the folds about his head had correspondingly loosened the bonds of his arms. The heavy

man on his legs was cramped, he swayed, his body, poised before settling in a new position, and, at that supreme moment of balanced inertness, Talmai doubled up his knees and sent him flying headforemost among the acacias.

Gods! But he must act quickly! As Gisdhubar hurled his foes, so through space the two remaining figures above him were scattered, and Talmai bounded to his feet. The accursed bonds! His fingers reached his dagger, the sharp blade did his behest, and the fetters burst asunder. Next he jerked the cloak from his head, not the flash of a second too soon, for the man he had hurled into the acacias swooped upon him in one giant leap—

Not upon a pinioned man.

Once, twice, thrice, the long, keen dagger in Talmai's hand sank into his assailant's body, noiselessly, but a startled cry of anguish told the Aramean that the point had reached the seat of life. With a gurgling moan the man lurched forward and fell to the ground.

Talmai drew his sword out and stood ready for the other two men. The fury of battle was aroused in him, the lust for blood, the savage instinct to kill. He darted into the shadow of the acacias, looking, peering into the darkness for a sight of his enemies. Their lives alone would not satisfy him—he would cut their bodies into ribbons. He ran hither and thither, up and down the avenue of acacias. He called fiercely to Barak, he defied the steward to emerge from hiding, he coaxed. Suddenly and silently as they made their attack, the priest and Barak disappeared, leaving their accomplice dead behind them.

As his rage flashed forth, so his judgment re-asserted itself, yet still hot with anger, Talmai went back to where he left his chief assailant. There was sufficient light for him to distinguish the features and dress. The face was unknown to him, but the costume was that of a priest. The open eyes were glassy and lifeless. Picking up the cloak with which he had been nearly suffocated the Aramean threw it over his arm, and returned to the inn.

Chapter XXVI

FROM KALAH TO NINEVEH—DEATH OF KAK-MERODACH

"DID the steward of the lady Harimtu attend thee last night, my friend?" inquired Talmai of Kak-Merodach, on their journey the next morning.

"No, my lord. I remained sober for thy cause. What I learned thou shalt learn, if it doth interest thee."

"I pray thee, tell."

"First, then, she has a consuming curiosity concerning thee, which I neither satisfied nor abated. From me she gleaned not even thy name, though she has a mouth smoother than oil. Wary is she, but piece by piece it came out that Khar-mes, the great high priest, is displeased with her and very angry. The cause thereof I could not discover, but it pertaineth subtilly to the loss of a slave, a girl of whose glorious beauty hints have reached me. Khar-mes's spies traced the girl to the vicinity of Nineveh."

"Pardon me, noble sirs," said Rimut the captain, riding abreast of them, "have ye heard aught of a murdered priest found not far from the inn this morning?"

"How long had he been there?" asked Kak-Merodach irreverently.

"I saw the body," broke in Itti-Bel, who was rarely out of hearing when a conversation became general. "It was very effectually stabbed."

"It may bring us trouble," continued Rimut, "the people are unruly."

"Soldier," asked Talmai, "Is there any number of the armies about Nineveh? How are they made up?"

The suddenness of the question took the captain by surprise.

"Why, my lord," he stammered, when he was cut short by Kak-Merodach.

"Heardst thou not the prince spoken of by the noble Nebuchadnezzar as his friend?" inquired the poet impatiently. "Must the friend of the king's son await an answer?"

"I heard the words of my lord," the captain answered with quiet dignity. "No reason is there why I should be silent. The spies of the kings of Egypt and Lydia are well informed of the investing strength, and all men may find out for the asking. Of the Babylonians there are seven captains of ten thousand men each. The conjoined armies of Cyaxares of Karkassi and his allies fully equal that muster. The Medes and Urartans under Cyaxares are the more numerous. Of the allies, comes first in armed strength, Mamit-arsu, lord of the city of the Medes. Then Asguzans, from beyond his country, the Manni from the country which lies this side of Urartu, the Gimirra from northwest of Urartu, the Sapardians of Bithynia and Galatia beyond the Gimirrans; from beyond Elam, come the Persians, sons of the Medes, and wilder and more ferocious than the barbarians under Mamit-arsu. Besides these there are thousands from the lands of the Nairi, and they come from every city which the Assyrians formerly ravaged with sword and torch. Surely, my lord, the mighty god of death has let loose the whirlwind against the proud city of the Assyrian butchers. In my father's land, Urartu, the Medes rule supreme. He was driven out by the father of this Cyaxares, and, hating also the Assyrians, he fled to Babylonia. Thus am I fighting with one enemy of my father's race against another."

"An enormous army," commented the poet. "Larger, yes, double, even treble the size of any that Nineveh ever sent forth."

The comment, pregnant with thought, was followed by an interval of silence, the riders plodding on at a pace

in keeping with the footman. They were at a high place in the road from which a wide sweep of the surrounding country was visible. They could see the tracery of trees where the winding Tigris was embowered, and their gaze followed it southward over the broad green level of orchard and field to the brilliantly banded tower of Nebo in Calah; or, turning north, far beyond the no less gorgeously coloured tower of Istar in Nineveh, they could see the white peaks of the faraway mountains. On the east, the temple of Istar of Arbela came to a dazzling point under the snowy summit of the mountains of the great range which lay between Assyria and Media. Then, too, they began at length to catch glimpses through intervening foliage of the great wall of Nineveh. They beheld, first, the towers, gaunt, grey, defiant. Next, part of the wall itself, forming chalky background to long stretches of green.

Evidences that they were approaching a large camp multiplied. Guard posts became frequent, and there were salutations between the soldiers of the Prince's Guard and those they met or passed. The question was always: "What news?" One, however, a mounted officer, who by his plaid kilt was recognisable as of the Babylonian royal guard, engaged Rimut in a whispered conference.

"My lord," explained Rimut, "powerful enemies have been here before thee. This soldier brings warning of treachery."

"Knows he the peril?"

"Priests, by some tale of sacrilege, have persuaded soldiers to attempt to seize upon thee after thou hast put our fortifications behind thee and before thou hast reached the gate of the city."

"And thou?" asked Kak-Merodach.

"My lord, thou heardst the command of my princely master. I serve but one."

Rimut spoke to an officer, and a word was passed down

the line of men. They examined their weapons, tightened their belts, and struck up a livelier, brisker gait.

They were yet at a considerable distance from Nineveh when they came to the first of a chain of oval-shaped entrenched camps, by which the city was surrounded. A stranger might have mistaken the camp for Nineveh itself, so large and stout were its brick walls and the surmounting towers. For two years the investment had lasted, and the enclosure of the beleaguerers had by continual fortification become nearly as formidable as the defences of the beleagued. Inside of these brick walls the particoloured tents of the soldiery were ranged in regular sequence to form streets intersecting each other at right angles. Here all the ordinary occupations of life were carried on, and each of these fortified camps was a community within itself. There were tents of many sizes and shapes—the pretentious quarters of a general with undulating billows of flaps stretching from pole to pole over offices, halls of audiences, and ante-chambers; the transplanted establishment of a rich nobleman, with court, harem, and stables; the miniature temple of a priesthood, with symbols, sacred chariots, and tripod altar—all gay with rainbow striping, and shining with polished metal. The meagre, smoke-discoloured covering of the common soldier, added strength, body, and picturesqueness to the diversified scene. Splendidly attired men and women lounged in the shade of awnings, and there was much eating, and drinking, and chatting. Through the doors of the humbler tents the occupants could be seen resting upon camp beds, grinding corn for their next meal, hovering over a pot boiling on the fire, dressing the carcass of a freshly slaughtered sheep, or pouring wine from leather bottles which swung in the air from a cross pole. Women there were in plenty, wives of warriors who had come from their homes to this strange place, and women who were not wives and were glad to find a home in a warrior's simple tent.

In front of the priest's quarters an altar smoked day and night, and at sunrise and sunset the commanding officer and his captains laid offerings upon it and recited prayers for the success of their king's arms.

In front of the commander's tent was his chariot, and affixed to the chariot was the royal standard, which preceded the warriors into battle. As a matter of form, Rimut stopped to pay his respects to the representative of the commander, and was bidden to proceed. The general-in-chief was not visible, nor did any of the captains court the attention of the party. Rumors of a conflict between Khar-mes and the prince had already got abroad, and it was wise to await the issue; the priest was old and wary, the prince was young and untried.

When they emerged from this enclosed camp the immense wall of Nineveh came into uninterrupted view, rising grandly above the intervening ground between it and the entrenchments of the besiegers. On every eminence of the castellated rampart the brazen standard of Assyria, the god Assur with bent bow, flashed in the sunlight, announcing by its presence, more eloquently than if trumpets roared, that within was the great king, the king of the land. Well might he feel safe behind that bulwark. One hundred feet was its height, one hundred feet its thickness, and a casing of hewn and polished stone reinforced this nearly solid mass of brick and rubble for half its height. The remainder of the exterior was covered with a coating of cream coloured stucco, which harmonised with the fancifully decorated battlements and graceful towers. Inside of this rampart, a scant eight miles in circumference, was crowded all that was left of the once puissant empire.

"The augurs," said Rimut, "have warned us to withhold our arm until Prince Nebuchadnezzar takes the field. Morning and night they looked into the liver, but found no omen of success until our prince set forth from Babylon. Now the gods bid us wait."

"Iyyar, the propitious month, will soon be here," said

Kak-Merodach, scrutinising some flashing objects on the wall ahead of them. "Why jeopard such an undertaking with haste. Iyyar is lucky for battle and siege, as is Tammuz for commencing a siege, yet one should not commence a war in Iyyar, or assault a city in Tammuz."

"Such is the talk at Kalah. Half our time we spend with the augur priests."

Kak-Merodach now saw that the shining objects on the battlements were the reflection of the sun from the polished spearheads, casques, and shields of Assyrian warriors.

Around the wall of Nineveh, stretching far beyond the range of archers and slingers, arbalast, and catapult, was an open space which the breath of war had swept clear of vegetation; in the most vigorous flush of spring not a blade of grass grew there. Over it armies sprang gloriously to the assault, and reeled back stricken with the flail of death. Corpses, from which the red stream gushed at every jerk, were dragged from it under a rain of missiles. Vultures swarmed to it and with hideous cries tore the carcasses of war-horses, that had fallen and been abandoned where they fell. Upon its blood-battened soil Assyria time and again belched forth her fighting men to teach her enemies that the spirit of Assur was not dead, and as they hacked and hewed, their terrifying battle shout rent the air as of old.

Out upon this open space rode Rimut and his charges, followed by the Babylonian guardsmen. They moved slowly, making signs of truce, and keeping a suspicious watch upon the gate, from which, in the twinkling of an eye, an overpowering hostile force might dart out upon them. While they were still too far from the wall for arrows to reach them, Talmai requested a halt. His gaze searched the flanking towers of the gate, the battlements, arbalestenas, and arrow-slits for some token that his coming had been anticipated. He could see that many persons were gathering at the nearest parapet of the wall.

Rimut told his guard to rest. He looked behind him

and saw a body of armed men gathering. They might have clustered together from curious companionship. The group on the open plain was the cynosure of every eye.

While he waited, Talmai examined the wall with critical interest. He noted the gigantic plinth of stone, the cincture of overhanging towers, and all the details of defensive construction. The gate was protected by an advanced work of brick and stone, which was nearly half the height of the wall, thrown across a deep, wide moat and reinforced by a pair of massive rectangular towers. The parapets of these towers were corbelled out and pierced with loopholes; between them was the outer gateway of the long, vaulted passage, through which ingress to Nineveh was gained. Here, thought he, force is impotent.

A buzz among the guardsmen, and their outstretched arms pointing toward the wall betokened a change in the current of events. On the battlement, outlined against the cloudless blue sky, stood a woman waving a white scarf. Back and forth it swung, and Talmai felt the blood rushing to his heart in a wave of tenderness, for he believed the woman was Sherah, welcoming him back to her side. Gazing on her, he knew not what was transpiring behind him.

Suddenly the regular movement of the scarf ceased, and it beat the air up and down, and Talmai fancied he could see the fair girl stamping her feet. The people on the wall and those down on the gateworks appeared to be in a commotion; they were frantically beckoning.

"My lord," said Rimut quietly, "there is a large troop pursuing us. Look behind thee."

Talmai turned. Riding down upon them from the direction of the Babylonian entrenchment were fully two hundred horsemen armed with spears and bows.

"They advance in attacking order," said Kak-Merodach.

By Rimut's command, his men formed a double line,

facing the oncomers, with spears couched and shields in place. Picked men were the guardsmen, keepers of royalty, whose valour had been proved in many conflicts. Behind them the mounted members of the party, Talmai, Rimut, Kak-Merodach, Itti-Bel, and the Babylonian lieutenant, took positions as a reserve.

This movement was noted by those bearing down upon them, who stopped short. There was a brief conference, and two riders, disengaging themselves from the others, urged their horses forward.

"Peace with thee, son of the Urartan," said one of them, riding up to the file of spears.

"With thee let there be peace, Babylonian," responded the captain, dryly.

"Thou hast here a man whose body we demand of thee in the name of Khar-mes, high priest of Babylonia," said the newcomer, in imperious tones.

"In the name of Prince Nebuchadnezzar we refuse to surrender him" responded Rimut, and then he continued wrathfully: "No more parleying. Back with thee!"

The Babylonian opened his mouth to address the soldiers, when Rimut savagely drew his sword. He was incensed by the implied insult to his prince. They sharply swerved their horses and trotted back to their comrades.

"May the plague demon cut them down!" muttered Rimut. "Shall we proceed, my lord?"

"As thou wilt."

The guardsmen resumed their march. They had proceeded but a short distance when a command from their leader caused them to again face about. The Babylonians were descending upon them at full speed.

"Ride for the gate," said Talmai to Itti-Bel.

The lad's face was pale, and the pupils of his eyes dilated.

"No, my lord," he replied. "I die here rather than run a second time." His hand shook as he detached his sword from its belt.

On came the Babylonians with furious yells, intended

to arouse terror in the breasts of their opponents. The beat of their horses' hoofs on the hard earth was echoed back from the wall of Nineveh, from which also came answering cries, and the men and women upon it ran about greatly excited.

Suddenly the oncoming force separated, wings darted off to the right and left while the larger portion continued straight ahead.

Talmai touched Rimut and, pointing toward the left, drew a sword, couched his lance, and charged. Kak-Merodach followed him. Rimut and his lieutenant dashed away to meet the right wing. Itti-Bel sat motionless.

Soon Talmai was in the midst of the Babylonians and, abandoning his spear in the body of the first warrior it encountered, he drew his second sword and, with both blades flashing in the air, began the dreadful havoc among his enemies which made his soubriquet of "The Two Handed" a name of terror. Kak-Merodach, inspired by his deeds, performed prodigies of valour. The Babylonians soon broke and fled.

Looking across the field, Talmai and Kak-Merodach saw that the main force had swept over the line of guardsmen, and that the plain was strewn with prostrate warriors, while a score of riderless horses running wildly in all directions showed that Rimut's veterans had made a gallant stand. The captain and his lieutenant were opposing vigorously a small bunch of Babylonians, but a much larger number was rushing at the Nabathean. The guardsmen on foot, observing this movement, ran forward to attack them from the rear.

The Nabathean took in the field at a glance, but he did not observe, nor did any of the combatants see, a gate within the great gate of Nineveh swing open, and a troop of horsemen emerge on the run.

To gain time for the guardsmen to come up, Talmai darted off at a tangent to the course of the attackers, who, thinking he was in flight, wheeled aside to intercept

"MADNESS POSSESSED THE LAD."—*Page 219.*

him. When they were all bent full tilt in one direction he veered. Kak-Merodach, however, not reckoning upon the deviation, plunged into the midst of the enemy. Talmai, again veering, caught a glimpse of him as he fell under a rain of blows. At that moment he heard the Assyrian battle cry—

"Ya-ilu! Sha-ya-ilu!"

The thunder of hoof-beats did not drown another cry, shrill, agonised—

"Talmai!"

One swift glance, and he saw Itti-Bel, far out in the field, on foot, and running toward him with uplifted sword. The lad's dainty garments were covered with dirt and blood, and his face was white. He was rushing to Talmai's assistance.

Talmai perceived that the moment for supreme action had arrived and, without having lost one flexure of the marvellous speed of his mare, he again charged the Babylonians. Again he fell upon them with his two swords, scattering blood in crimson splashes, men falling before him like wheat before the harvester. He was struggling to reach the poet, who, if not already dead, was in imminent danger. Vaguely he heard the shrill cry of Itti-Bel. The Babylonians, too, heard a cry, a cry that shook their courage—

"Ya-ilu! Sha-ya-ilu!"

The desperate charge of the Nabathean in itself had so taken them by surprise that they struck at him blindly, half-heartedly. To them he seemed to be the god of the whirlwind. While some of them were frantically striking at Talmai, before abandoning the conflict, Itti-Bel ran up. Madness possessed the lad, and fate protected him, until at the last, when one departing Babylonian thrust a spear through his shoulder. With a despairing cry of "Talmai!" he fell.

Quickly as Talmai had been surrounded by enemies he was deserted by them. The charging Assyrians divided their ranks and passed around in pursuit of the

fleeing Babylonians, and he hastened to Kak-Merodach. Springing from his horse, he found the poet in bad case, thrust through and through. All the rage departed from the Nabathean, and he tenderly lifted up the head of his friend. Kak-Merodach opened his eyes and recognised him.

"Ah, son of Mathan," he gasped, "what a poem I could have composed on this day."

"Live, my friend, to write it," sobbed the Nabathean.

"No, there is not even time for a priest to scream a mystic charm over me." Lower and lower sank his voice, and his eyes began to glaze. "I am happy, prince, to have died for thee. Keep me in the midst of thy heart."

The last words were barely audible. Big tears were rolling down the cheeks of the Nabathean. Kak-Merodach's frame quivered as he struggled to utter a farewell word. The effort to breathe racked him with pain. A convulsion shook him, and his head fell back, lifeless. Talmai reverently lowered the body and stood erect beside it. He was standing there when Omar, who had followed the Assyrians out of the gate, rode up to him.

"Peace be to thee and to the dead, son of Mathan," said the merchant gravely.

"And to the wise Omar, peace," repeated Talmai. "There is another, dead or alive, I must find, my father's brother."

Glancing around, he saw Itti-Bel not far away, prone upon the earth.

"There," said he.

"He will be my care," said the merchant, alighting, "and here is Jehu to assist me. Let us retreat into Nineveh at once. Dost bring thy friends?"

"Yes."

"What of these Babylonians who came with thee?"

"They are Prince Nebuchadnezzar's guardsmen, sent by him to escort me to Nineveh. We were attacked by other Babylonians, to make me prisoner."

"They must enter Nineveh with us. The great king

is generous and will release them at my request. Tell them this."

Omar stooped and tore open Itti-Bel's tunic to examine his wound. A look of surprise stole over his face as he did so, and he beckoned to Jehu. The faithful servant received a few words of instruction and, with Omar's assistance, took the prostrate form of the lad before him on his horse and rode into the gate of Nineveh. The others followed.

Chapter XXVII

AT OMAR'S HOUSE IN NINEVEH—TWO SETS OF PRIESTS—IDENTIFICATION OF THE AMULET

IN a pleasant garden of the northern quarter of Nineveh, not far from the royal mound, the Jewess Sherah, half buried among downy cushions, reclined upon a capacious stone bench and listened to the rythmic splash of a fountain. Her gown, a soft white material, was confined at the waist by a girdle of gold, from which dangled chains of mesh containing sparkling gems, and in her fillet was a royal ruby. One foot, partly covered by a sandal, protruded from beneath her robe, a foot delicately pink as the faintest flush in a seashell, with veins like the purple tendrils of the nautilus. A slave slowly waved a fan of ostrich feathers over her. To this part of the garden drifted Omar and Talmai in the course of a peripatetic consultation. She heard them coming, and, after a swift glance to assure herself not alone of the propriety of her attitude, but of its gracefulness as well, she pretended to sleep. The slave, with the skill of her kind, held the fan so that the light it shed on the face of her mistress accentuated its exquisite loveliness. Such was the picture, with a frame of olive green foliage, that met the gaze of the two men. Talmai stopped in dumb admiration, and Omar raised a finger to his lips. They began to move softly away, when Sherah opened her eyes and merrily invited them to stay.

The merchant smiled at her fondly. "If thy rest will not be disturbed, we will end our walk here," and he seated himself on another stone bench, an example followed by his companion.

"The valiant Rimut and his guardsmen are departed

hence, my daughter," said Omar by way of preface. "My promise to them has the Assyrian king most generously fulfilled, and they are now with Prince Nebuchadnezzar."

"The Babylonians who attacked thee have been punished?" she asked.

"We spared thee that sight. All Nineveh was on the battlements, where thou didst wave a warning to the son of Mathan, to witness the triumphal return of the guardsmen and the punishment of the rebels."

"I hope they were well punished," she said, clenching her hand, as the recollection of the struggle revived.

"Two entire companies were impaled before the walls in the sight of both armies, and with them two generals who might have prevented the attack and did not. Thus the prince replied to Khar-mes."

"No, not that!" she exclaimed, pressing her hands over her eyes. "I did not hope that such punishment should be laid on them."

"Swift and stern is a king's vengeance. His wrath is as messengers of death."

"It is terrible to be a king."

"Where the word of a king is, there is power, and 'tis thus power copes with craft. So must we deal with the priests who follow hard after us," said Omar. "For two weeks have my spies been at work, and their reports serve only to confuse. Almost am I convinced, son of Mathan, that two sets of priests are pursuing thee, or us."

"Thou utterest truth," responded Talmai.

"Yea, but—" Omar hesitated.

"Hast thou the gem we found in Babylon?"

Omar turned to the slave. "Send Jehu hither," he commanded.

Jehu came, and the merchant instructed him to fetch a certain bronze casket, which was speedily laid before the master. He pressed a spring and the lid flew up, exposing a number of enwrapped packages, from which Omar selected one. Slowly he unrolled the wrapping, disclos-

ing the great, deep-hearted, glowing ruby. The merchant handed it to Talmai, who laid it in the lap of the Jewess. Against her white robe it took on more colour and emitted flashes of its slumbrous fire. The ruby on Sherah's forehead, itself a rare and costly gem, appeared in comparison to be a common gaud.

Talmai eyed the sparkling gem. Omar eyed the Nabathean.

"The Amulet of Bel and the Bride of Bel," Talmai said in explanation.

"By the son of Nun!" exclaimed Omar. "The stone—" he seized it up and scrutinised it keenly. "Yes the Amulet of Bel! The man struck down by thee had stolen it! The priest saw thee, thou wert seen with us, and hence were we followed."

"By one set of priests."

"And the other set traced the lady Sherah and intend to recapture her."

Omar embraced the Nabathean.

"Now, master of thy speech," said he, "explain, if thou wilt, how these things became known to thee."

Talmai related the circumstances of meeting with the old priest at Imgur-Bel, the adventure at Calah, and the night assault in the alley of acacias. His references to Kak-Merodach were full of the tenderness of friendship, and Sherah, who knew with what anxious solicitude the body of the poet was given a cremation such as was accorded only to great noblemen, thought she preferred the young man in this his tenderer mood, though she listened breathlessly to a recital which however modestly told made the narrator appear to her as a warlike hero. The battle before the gate of Nineveh she had witnessed from the city wall.

In closing, Talmai gave it as his belief that the Amulet was the twin of the sapphire of his father. He had mentally connected the sapphire with the Sacred Stone alluded to by Urman, the Gambalian, and by adding to this deduction the tradition of the Amulet of Bel, as related by

Kak-Merodach, and partly confirmed by the old priest, he had reached the final conclusion.

Omar thought over with deliberation what he had just heard before he spoke. "Recallst thou to mind," said he, "what Jehu told us at the Ford of the Rising Sun, about a certain miracle wrought in the Upper Temple of Bel? It was to conceal its loss from the breast of the god that the fable of the prophetic cloak was invented."

Sherah handed the fiery gem to the merchant. "I fear its magic power," she explained.

"It is a power we will turn to our good. The sapphire was once used by the royal Mathan to summon certain Arameans to his side. I would that I could in this matter take counsel with him. By some adroit use of the ruby thou mayst yet bring about the return of the former estate and fortune of thy house. But these are imaginations of thought. What became of the cloak taken from the priest in the alley of acacias, my friend?"

"It was lost in the struggle before the gate of Nineveh."

"Put away the jewels, my good Jehu," commanded the merchant.

"It is the hour for Itti-Bel to be brought into the garden," Sherah said, and summoned a slave.

"The lad recovers strength slowly," remarked Omar.

"I understand it not," Talmai rejoined. "The wound, while deep, was not dangerous."

"The bruise is incurable. It is not the stab from the enemy, Nabathean, from which he suffers. His bravery is not like thine. Thou didst inherit a soul incapable of fear. Itti-Bel fears not death, yet acts the coward."

The lad was brought out on a light couch, which was deposited in the centre of the little group. Sherah gently rearranged the cushions, and he smiled faintly on all with something of his natural archness.

Omar lifted the bandage and scrutinised the wound. "Thou shouldst be well ere now, Itti-Bel," said he.

"Alas, my lord," answered the lad, "my wound is one

which even the herbs of the wise Omar cannot heal. What is it to me that my heart lives?"

"Neither herb nor mollifying plaster will restore him to health," said Omar. "He cannot recover from the cankerous thought that fear did again come upon him as a storm, and that a second time his heart failed him, and he became as a woman."

"I saw him attack the Babylonians most valiantly," said Sherah, tentatively.

"Ah, dear friend, the deed may have seemed valiant unto thee, as I am told by these my kind friends it seemed to them. Yet my heart panted, and fear seized on me when I beheld the soldiers charging with every spear pointed at my breast. I can see them now whenever I close my eyes," and the long lashes drooped.

"Do not conjure up the scene," murmured Sherah.

"It was not I, my lord, whom thou didst see attacking the Babylonians. The real Itti-Bel slipped from his horse when the foe charged, intending to flee before them, but a demon took possession of his body and filled it with madness and a rage for blood. Of the things which happened later I know naught, for, believe me, my lord, I, Itti-Bel, am the same coward who that time before hid from the sight of strife and violence. Doubt it not." Itti-Bel uttered these words in a tone of deep dejection.

"That is the hurt, son of Mathan," said Omar.

Talmai comprehended. A frenzy had seized the lad, and his delicate body had not recovered from the shock and strain. Yet Talmai could not but love him, and besides had not Itti-Bel saved his life in Babylon? The Nabathean distinguished between the fine courage of the act of unselfishness and the cowardice of sudden fear paralysing the mind, and then madness supervening and galvanising the body.

"I would that he showed light-heartedness, of which thou didst inform me," said Omar to Talmai. "'A merry heart is a good medicine,' the wise man sayeth."

"I think," said Itti-Bel, "If my lord will promise to

let me be at his side when next he meets the foe, I would recover quickly."

"It shall be according to thy wish, Itti-Bel."

"I feel well already," and Itti-Bel smiled with a faint display of his old spirit. "I will yet conquer this weakness and fear."

That evening Omar and Talmai held the last of several conferences over the future course of the prince with relation to the war. Actuated by the caution of age, the merchant advised delay, while the young man was firmly resolved upon prompt and vigorous support of Nebuchadnezzar.

"The Babylonian governor at Ardiban did deceive thee into quietness," argued the merchant. And, both Assyria and Babylonia being content that thou shouldst remain quiet, why disquiet thyself? Stay thou therefore at peace, and do nothing rashly. To believe the confederates will destroy Assyria root and branch is a vain imagining, and unless utterly destroyed, she will revive and grow as a vine."

"What is there left to the great king save Nineveh? All his countries have revolted, the confederates have wasted all his lands, and his governors have been destroyed."

"Many mighty kings have tried to sweep Assyria with the besom of destruction, but none rejoiced over it. Here in the library of Assurbanipal thou mayst read the history of this great nation, the true sons of the people from which sprang also the Babylonians, the Hebrews, and Arameans. Babylon by her numerous harlotries has become the mother of harlots, but Assyria has kept pure the blood of her great men and true. Confederation after confederation has dashed itself to pieces against the mighty rampart enclosing this city. After this storm is past thou wilt see her armies pouring over the lands of the East and the West, the North and South, as for thirty generations they have done. Dream not, then, of witnessing the complete downfall of Assyria."

Talmai was exceedingly troubled by these words, as they not only ran counter to his judgment but his wishes. He saw that he must act contrary to the advice of the very man to whom his father had committed him for advice. Omar divined his thoughts before he uttered them and resumed with the cheerfulness of an age-seasoned philosopher:

"It shall be as thou willst, son of my brother. A man's heart deviseth his way. No more shall I seek to persuade thee. If thou decidest for Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, let us set our lines accordingly."

"No," said Talmai, "I cannot drag thee into this contest. The fortunes of thy house are in the balance, everything to lose——"

"All I possess is thine, son of Mathan. The substance that is the property of the house of Egibi is protected with the Egibi seal. These chambers, filled with all precious and pleasant riches, bear its impress, and neither the king of the Medes or of the Babylonians, nor the king of the Assyrians, would break that seal. Whichever way this war ends, this house is safe from pillage. That which belongs to the Egibi shall go to the Egibi, but that which is mine own is thine, and, though never greedy of gain, my riches have mounted up."

The hearty genuineness of the words left no room for doubt, and the Aramean was stirred by the emotion of gratitude, more for the spirit of the offer than its worldly significance.

"I thank thee, brother of my father," said he simply.

"Following out thy plans, it will be necessary to send a message to the Pekods and the Gambalians. Mine own Jehu is available, silent, brave, and faithful. He shall deliver the message. How soon can thy allies be in the field?"

"Before the month of Iyyar is past they will be here."

"In the meantime we can visit thy father. Nay, do not think I would ask him to dissuade thee from joining with the Babylonians. It is upon this matter of the

Amulet I wish to consult him, and perhaps to learn something about our charge, the young Jewess. The Amulet may do more for thee than thy army."

"The young Jewess?" asked Talmai.

"Yes. Dost wish her for thy harem?" Omar asked sharply.

The question disconcerted Talmai for a moment.

"That shall be as thou sayest," he answered, after a moment. "I should prefer her to rule there as my wife."

"It is well. She will not go dowerless. I have adopted her, and, by the son of Nun! she shall go as richly dowered as the daughter of a king. I have received news from Kabtiya of the Egibi, which strangely affects her."

"Would she be content with me as her lord?" asked Talmai.

Omar gazed at him with an expression of contempt. "Hast thou no eyes, son of Mathan? Speak to her from thy heart."

The abrupt entrance of Jehu broke off their conversation.

"There has been a priest set upon and wounded near thy gate, my master," he explained, "and he has been brought into the lodge of the porter. Shall he be given care here?"

"Fetch him in."

Chapter XXVIII

THE WOUNDED PRIEST AND THE KING'S FAVOURITE

TALMAI had learned, since entering Babylon, to associate danger with the presence of a priest. Could it be that he had been pursued into Nineveh? If the influence of Omar was sufficient to procure him ingress, the ties of priest-cult would undoubtedly procure an entrance for the men of Khar-mes. With the exception of the patron gods of cities, the deities of Assyria and Babylonia, and their cults, were largely the same.

Jehu came in. "A lady who saw the priest where he lay wounded requests speech with the son of Egibi," said he.

"Bring her hither."

The house occupied by Omar was one of a large establishment in a walled garden, and the room in which he received his visitor was fit for the reception of a king. She was veiled, and only a maid accompanied her into the presence of the merchant.

"Peace to thee and thy house, wise Omar," she said.

"Unto thee may there ever be peace," he responded. "Wilt thou sit, mistress?"

They seated themselves, and the host waited courteously for his visitor to open the conversation.

"It is by chance that I enter thy house, merchant," she explained, after the slave had arranged her gown in becoming folds. "I was taking the evening air in my litter when I heard sounds as of men struggling together, though none raised a voice. My torch-bearers beheld two men attack a third, who fell to the earth. The two fled as we came up. The wounded man is a priest, and he declares his assailants also were priests. I sought not the

occasion, but now we are met, merchant, I would ask counsel, for thou art of wise repute in the city."

The voice was rich and melodious, yet sad. Omar had heard it before, and ere she ceased speaking he guessed aright her identity.

"The beautiful and powerful Istar-bela will find in me a friend," he answered.

The woman raised her hand warningly and by the merest gesture indicated the Nabathean.

"From the son of my brother I have no secrets."

"Thine ears art keen of hearing, Omar," the visitor said, lifting the veil from her face. As the merchant had remarked, she was beautiful, of a type not Semitic. She was an Aryan Mede, fair and blue-eyed, the favourite concubine of Sin-sar-iskun, the King of Assyria, and beloved of the people for her good temper and charity to the poor. She was still young, though her dignified bearing and the traces of sorrow in her face gave her a matronly air.

"Hear first the words of the priest," she advised, and the man was brought into the room on a bed. His cloak was over the body and concealed the blood on his garments. Talmai recognised it as the one worn by the priest who attacked him in the avenue of acacias, the cloak which he himself had lost in the affray before Nineveh.

"Canst talk, priest?" asked Omar.

"Aye, and curse," he responded with bitterness.

"The man who can curse has life left in him. What can I do for thee beside salve thy wound?"

"Nothing, my lord, unless it be to spread abroad a report of my death."

"A singular request, priest, and one not enjoined upon me by my law to grant."

"By this means thou mayst save my life. I have fallen under a priestly ban, though why I know not. I may yet escape them if they believe me dead."

"Say on, priest," said Istar-bela. To Omar she whis-

pered: "I fear a conspiracy in this, and any conspiracy may have the throne for its end."

"Ah, mistress," said the priest, "but for thy arrival I should now be travelling the road from which none return. Just after the going down of the sun I was sent here from the temple of Nebo to observe all who passed the gates. This cloak was I given to wear, and told that if anyone recognised it and spoke, I was to allure him to the temple. Unsuspecting a trap, I came and waited, and weariness was weighing upon me when two priests drew nigh. By their robes I knew them to be men of Gula, of the sect of Eridu. They stopped, on beholding me, and whispered together, and then drew nearer. Of a sudden, one of them, an old man, sprang upon me and thrust a dagger into me. Even before I fell they were over me, searching me with haste, but at that moment, noble lady, thou didst appear, and they fled."

"Wouldst know the old priest, shouldst thou meet him again?" asked the merchant.

"I have his face in my mind."

"What thinkst thou of this occurrence, pearl of the kidmur?"

"The man's mouth uttereth truth."

"It is the hand of the slayer," continued the wounded man. "Other priests have been silenced, yet why should priests of another than mine own order be deputed to efface me?" he asked, speaking partly to himself. He was sent away, and the merchant, the Nabathean and the king's favourite were left to continue their conversation.

"This house is known of old to thee, great lady," said Omar, noting her contemplation of the rich furnishing and ornamentation of the room.

"Once it was my palace," she answered sadly.

"And is thine now, and all within, and we thy servants."

"Thy generosity in refusing for so long a time to take possession, though I failed to repay the money thou

didst lend me, moved my heart, my friend, and the king, my lord, the king of kings, is not unmindful."

"A thousand fold has he repaid me from the measure of his good will. My humble request that he liberate the guardsmen of Prince Nebuchadnezzar, who protected my kinsman, was granted immediately. To the great king, long days and extended years."

"So pray I daily and nightly to our lady of Arbela. The enemy surrounds us, and we are as a bird in a cage. Of this it is I would question thee."

"'Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart,' the wise man hath said, and he adds: 'So doth the sweetness of a friend by hearty counsel.'"

"Thou knowest that which is said by the diviners and oracles: 'None shall take Nineveh by force until the river itself declares war upon the city.' Such is the divine utterance. But I tell thee, Omar, who art of another people and a stranger to the gods of Assyria, as was I until my lord turned the light of his countenance upon me, I like not the divine utterance. At the thought of their beloved Tigris making war upon them, the Ninevites jest, but why, thou who art surnamed the wise, why speaks the oracle of the river making war upon the city, if the thing were not to be thought of?"

"The sayings of oracles are a labyrinth in which thou mayst wander for days and reach not the true centre. They are the utterances of priestly jugglers of words and craftsmen of dark sayings. Put not thy trust in oracles, gracious mistress, nor vain visions, nor flattering divinations."

"Nor do I, Omar. Oft when doubt is heavy upon me I ride about the city with the hope of gaining faith by viewing its mighty defenses, and though my father's gods were not the gods of this land, yet have I placed the holy reeds and implored Assur and all the great gods of the land with costly sacrifices. From Mimma-abi-sa the Arbelite alone came an answer of good omen. I will repeat it to thee as the words are engraved upon my heart."

Omar signified that he was listening.

"These are the words upon the sacred tablet:—

'I am Istar of Arbela.
King of Assyria, fear not!
Sixty great gods with me
Are joined—they will guard thee—
The moon-god on thy right, the sun god on thy left.
The sixty great gods around thee.
Stand. They have made the centre of thy stronghold firm.
Upon mankind, trust not.
Turn thine eyes
To me, look on me,
'I am Istar of Arbela.
Assur is pleased with thee.
I will strengthen thy youth.
Fear not. Glorify me.'

—"This command, given through the holy seeress of Arbela, rejoiced the king exceedingly for a time, but soon to gloomy thoughts returned. Like doves does he mourn bitterly night and day. Before his god he prostrates his face in prayer, and painful lamentation does he raise. Under the former king one hundred days of fasting and prayer were ordained and availed naught, and now, O Omar, the great king thinks of making the supreme sacrifice."

Istar-bela lowered her voice as she finished the last sentence, and Omar gazed at her in astonishment.

"Not the supreme sacrifice of the ancient days?" he asked incredulously.

"Even so, only that he as the elder of his people shall take the place of his first-born."

"There is bewitchment in this."

"An old, and evil-eyed priest of the cult of Gulu in Eridu is the sorcerer. As the Oracle of Eridu is he

known. He it is who first preached to the king that all must be as in the ancient days, in the generations of old, ere Nineveh could be saved. The high priest of Assur strives to direct my lord's heart to other matters, but the Oracle has cast a spell. Sin-sar-iskun believes the fierce wrath of the gods is upon him. Daily he searches his heart to learn wherein he has sinned against the ordinances of the great gods. In their courts he has poured out oil like water, burnt offerings has he made, and the odours of cedar and the finest of incense have ascended as sweet savour. Their shrines he has purified, and their places of prayer he has cleansed, and with supplications and penitential psalms has he besought them to turn their faces to him. He has restored and established in peace the daily sacrifices, as they were in the days of Isme-Dagan and the priestly rulers of Assur. Albeit the gods refuse to take his hand, or accept his gift and receive his ransom, and so, urged by the Oracle of Eridu, almost is he decided to offer himself as a holocaust to avert the threatened doom of his faithful city. Canst thou, O Omar, fortify me to wean him from this intention? Is there not among thy possessions an amulet or a charm wherewith I may lull this intent ere it becomes set purpose? Canst thou not induce the gods to aid us, since our own gods turn from us? Speak, Omar, I implore thee."

The favourite's language, voice, and looks appealed strongly to the merchant, who cherished her friendship. She held her hand before her in an attitude of supplication. Her maid dropped on her knees before her mistress and covered her face in the folds of her mistress's gown.

"The god of the Hebrews, noble lady, is not a god of sacrifice and incantation. He is not a lord to be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousands of rivers of oil, nor must the sinner give his first-born for his transgressions, the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul. To please the god of the Hebrews, thou must desire

mercy, and sacrifice, and the knowledge of Him, more than burnt offerings. Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be protected."

The king's favourite pondered over this speech with wrinkled brow. She would ask Omar how to make an image of this unknown god, she thought, and then she suddenly remembered that much time had elapsed since she left the royal palace.

"I must return!" she exclaimed. "To-morrow will I send for thee, son of Egibi."

Chapter XXIX

TALMAI AND SHERAH

"YOUTH, indeed, is a wreath of roses," said Omar to Talmai, beholding Sherah and Itti-Bel walking together in the shade of the trees several days after the departure of Jehu. A pretty picture they made for the two men, as they strolled through the shady garden. Sherah wore a rich gown of deep purple, confined at the waist by a flexible silver girdle, studded with amber hyacinths, and the white fillet in her auburn hair was fastened with a single large hyacinth. Itti-Bel had on a bright cardinal tunic reaching to the knees, cherry red sandals, and white greaves, with cardinal embroidery. A white cloak hung loosely from his shoulders, and a dainty red coif made idle pretence of confining his fluffy hair.

"I have sent forth inquiries about the Greek, Cleon, whom the Ionian seeks," said the merchant. "There are many Greeks among the besiegers, mainly refugees and adventurers."

"Wavers the king still in resolution?"

"Yea, but ever clings to the diviners and interpreters of dreams for a sign from his gods quitting him of his resolve to offer his body as a living sacrifice. The royal palace swarms with soothsayers and necromancing priests, and to obtain grace there one need but devise a cunning incantation or cast a hitherto unheard spell. Strange gods are entreated as diligently as are Assur and Istar. But, behold, our young friends have discovered us."

Talmai, who usually had eyes alone for Sherah, when she was present, happened to particularly note Itti-Bel,

into whose cheeks the constant hue of health was returning. The peachy beauty of the lad did not pale beside the exquisite loveliness of Sherah. Truly, as said Omar, wreaths of roses.

Sherah noticed the glance astray. "Behold," said she vivaciously, nodding her head toward Itti-Bel, "soon will thy comrade be fit for the field."

For a second the colour in the lad's cheeks rivalled her own in crimson brilliancy. "It is true, my lord," stammered he, "I am quite recovered, and hold thee to thy promise." The words restored his confidence, and he added in his customary tone of gayety: "The grim son of Dunanu would miss me, were I not in the forefront of battle."

"Noble Talmai," interrupted Sherah, "on the day we separated at the Ford of the Rising Sun, the thought came to me—silly it was, perhaps—that the man on the white mule was bent on following the old priest rather than Jehu. What thinkst thou of the conceit?"

Talmai was surprised at her penetration.

"Her lips are the lips of truth," interposed Omar, misapprehending the cause of the Nabathean's hesitation in replying.

"The counsel of her heart was wise," Talmai hastened to say. "It may be, and indeed seems, that the priest of Eridu meant to follow the bearer of the Amulet, that a priest of Bel-Merodach pursued the priest of Eridu, and that in the windings of roads and lanes the man of Bel lost sight of the old priest and followed me to Hillat. I believe thy surmising, daughter of Omar, shall be justified."

Sherah's face glowed with pleasure.

"In the attempt to slay the priest who took refuge here, I suspect more plotting," said the merchant, taking up the thread. "The cloak he wore, which was the cloak worn by the priest of Eridu who waylaid thee, son of Mathan, in the alley of the acacias, and was lost by thee before the gate of Nineveh, was recovered by priests of

Bel, who solicited and obtained the aid of the priest of Nebo. Aware of thy presence in this house, the men of Nebo placed it on the priest we now have here and sent him out as a spy and lure. If thou hadst set upon him thou wouldst have been seized and handed over to the priests of Bel. The old priest of Eridu, too, had traced thee hither and, with a companion, was spying around, when suddenly he beheld the cloak, which he recognised and, mistaking the wearer for thee, attacked him, hoping to recover the Amulet. Long and crooked is the way out of this labyrinth, but verily I believe the end is in sight. The enemy that is discovered is least to be feared."

A slave approached, and was bidden to speak.

"The lady Istar-bela, attended by the chief eunuch, craves audience, my lord," answered she.

"Admit them."

The merchant went forward to meet these two powers in the king's household. The man who walked behind the royal favourite was of more than ordinary height and bulk, clean-shaven, plump-visaged, and of fair olive complexion. A broad fillet set with precious stones bound his iron-gray hair, which fell in a bunch of curls to his shoulders. His long fringed robe was profusely ornamented with emblems of fertility, and, as indication of his office, a fringed scarf hung from his left shoulder to his waist. In his ears, and on his arms and wrists were massive rings of gold with the royal rosette embossed upon them, and he carried a short jewelled sword in a cross-belt. Another belt decorated with rosettes encircled his ample waist. Though he walked behind Istar-bela, he bore himself as one of authority.

"Thy servant bids thee welcome, light of the royal eye," said Omar to the favourite. "And thou, too, art welcome, good Zirya," he added, addressing the eunuch, who bowed to the earth.

"Necessity is laid upon me for this intrusion, son of Egibi," responded the favourite. "Our kind friend

Zirya has become the possessor of information closely concerning thee."

"Speak, Istar-bela, but ere thou impartest this news, rest and refresh thyself." He summoned servants, who procured sweet, cooling drinks, and there ensued the customary polite small talk.

"Our poet hath it, 'As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country,'" said Omar, at length.

"It is not good news, my friend," answered the favourite. "Thou hast foes at court, the thought of whose hearts is evil. Speak, Zirya."

"I am the dust of thy feet, O Omar," said the eunuch. "How these matters have been revealed to me, I may not utter; but it is laid to thy charge that thou hast sinned against the ordinances of the great gods."

"Proceed, good Zirya."

"I am the servant of the great king, and thy well-wisher, and on hearing of these charges, in remembrance of past favours, I gained the time in which thou mayst act; though if it were known I had warned thee, surely would I drink of the well of the waters of death."

"As the danger so shall be the reward."

"Know then, prince of generosity, priests have told the king, my lord, that thou didst profane the mansion of the great god Bel-Merodach. One chargeth that thou didst steal from thence a certain sacred Amulet, and the other that thou hast seduced thither a certain Bride of Bel. Thou knowest, O Omar, that the king my lord, weeping hot tears for Nineveh, turns his face to the priests, and we, his true counsellors, are not listened to as in the days of old. I must tell thee that thy privilege of departing from and entering Nineveh has been taken away. I put into the king's mind thy dealings with him and his debt to the house of Egibi, and while he has forbidden them to do thee hurt they lie in wait for thy blood, believing they have thee caged."

The speech of the eunuch, slow and measured, had differing effects on his hearers. Omar was genuinely

alarmed, though not for himself, when he heard that his liberty of coming and going was revoked. Talmai at first felt pleased that a period of inaction was drawing to a close, and then sad at the thought of parting with the Jewess. Sherah's fear of falling into the power of Kharmes revived. Itti-Bel, though not understanding all the eunuch said, apprehended danger, and the signs of returning health departed from his cheeks.

The face of Talmai seemed to fascinate Zirya. He had been given to understand by Istar-bela that the young man was a kinsman of Omar. Now Omar, though ordinarily supposed to be a Babylonian, he knew to be a Hebrew. In Talmai he recognised the Aramean traits, different from either Hebrew or Babylonian, as an Arabian courser from a Babylonian chariot horse.

"Thy words are as vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, good Zirya," said Omar. "But what saith the wise? In vain is the net spread in the eyes of any bird. Though I do confess," he added, "the net appears to be already spread."

"Not so, son of Egibi," spoke Istar-bela. "I bring thee hope. May I have speech with thee aside?"

Omar assented. At a word from her the eunuch withdrew. She and the merchant departed for the house, and soon after Itti-Bel left Talmai and Sherah alone.

Fear had taken all the coquetry out of the young woman, but her confidence in the guile of the merchant, who so tenderly addressed her as daughter, and in the prowess of the hero who hovered protectingly near, buoyed her spirits wonderfully.

"The accursed high priest stretches his arms far for thee," Talmai said bitterly.

Sherah showed her dejection in speech and manner. "Better to have left me at the Ford of the Rising Sun."

"Never shall we desert thee."

His tone sent a thrill of joy through her. She was stirred to the depth of her nature with the sweet thought that Talmai loved her, yet there was that tantalising

uncertainty which love inflicts as a torture before words and protestations relieve the suspense.

"The great high priest," said she, "appears to me as one of those evil spirits which our women supplicate with bated breath, the possessors of the evil eye, for whose conjuration they pay so dearly. When I was a child I had a lapis-lazuli amulet with a charm graven upon it, and Khar-mes blessed it and put it around my neck. I remember that his touch made me shrink as though he himself was the possessor of the evil eye against whom my charm was my shield. The bitter breath of the god the women call these demons, and they say no doors or walls can keep them out."

There was an awkward silence, which was broken by Talmai. "Sherah," said he, "the Amulet which thou didst hold in thy lap the other day, the Amulet of Bel, cannot be appraised in bars of gold. Thinkst thou Khar-mes would forego his claim on thee in exchange for this stone?"

"I know not, son of Mathan."

"If it is thy will, he shall have his choice. But first must we be in a situation to exact conditions. Couldst thou give up the riches and ease with which thou are lovingly surrounded for the desert or the hardships of a soldier's portion?"

"I could live anywhere with those I love."

Talmai was woefully embarrassed; it dawned upon him that he was bargaining for the hand of Sherah, a proceeding which was remote from his intent.

"I should rejoice exceedingly in the wide desert, where no walls of brick bound the vision, and the moving scenes of the camp would be as pleasant pictures," she remarked reflectively. "Sometimes I see in a vision the desert, tents, moving horses, and the long reaches of a river. I hope my father will take me along."

Talmai had recovered his equanimity, and he determined to brave the affair to a conclusion. "Wilt thou come with me as a soldier's wife?" he asked, and,

ashamed of his abruptness, he hastened to add: "It is a hard thing to ask of one tenderly reared. Since first we met, love of thee hath overwhelmed my mind, hath ravished my heart. Separated from thee, I fought to return to thy side. Without thee as a helpmate, my ambition would be sterile."

"I am not fit—not of rank—I am an unknown," stammered Sherah. "Thou art a prince."

"Yes, a prince with naught but ancestors," replied Talmai, sitting upon the bench beside her, and taking her hand. "Let me call thee my own, my love."

"Omar my father——"

"Consents with cheerfulness of heart, fairest among women."

"Thou hast had speech of this?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, Sherah, and he urges our union, though he would first visit my father. Do not thou vex his heart, as thou lovest him, O thou whom my soul loveth," and Talmai drew her gently toward him.

"Since he wishes it—" she murmured. "Set me as a seal upon thy heart."

Talmai folded her in his embrace, and placed the kiss of betrothal on her forehead. The position seemed to be one of much comfort or solace, for she remained there, quietly weeping, a manifestation which was puzzling to the Nabathean. The tears ceased to flow after a time, and he stroked her soft silken hair with a gentle proprietary touch.

"Speak to me, Sherah," he whispered. "Let me behold thy countenance, let me hear thy voice."

"My beloved," she answered, barely audible, "when thou didst pluck me from the camel in Babylon thou didst pluck my heart from out of my body."

Chapter XXX

THE PASSAGE OF THE THIEVES

"VERILY it passes understanding," said Istar-bela to Omar, when they entered the residence which once was hers and still retained all the formal evidences of royal habitation except armed guards, "that the great king, the king of kings, the king of the four regions, the descendant of Assurbanipal, Esarhaddon, Sennacharib, and Sargon, should have surrendered this his palace to a merchant for a debt of money, even though thy house be composed of merchants who are altogether princes."

"This house and all it contains are thine, choice of the king. I am but the great king's steward."

The favourite smiled.

"I will tax thy liberality no further, son of Egibi. Here is a certain apartment containing two rooms, to which there is but one entrance, the only such apartment in the house."

"I know the place. It adjoins the rooms which thou didst occupy, and which are as thou didst leave them, sealed and awaiting thy return. Here is the key."

Omar pulled at a thin gold chain which hung about his neck and drew forth a small key. They went across the large central court of the house to a closed door on the south side. Istar-bela recognised it as the door of her former apartment.

"No one shall break the seal except thyself, queen of the kidmur. Within are thy goods, thy furniture and thy ornaments."

Tears sprang to the eyes of the favourite. "A princely thought, son of Egibi," was her thanks.

"Between this door and the chambers occupied by me is the place of which thou didst speak." Saying which Omar led her to the door mentioned, broke the seal, applied the key to the pendant lock, and threw back the heavy brass-studded leaf.

"Enter, I pray thee," he said.

Istar-bela looked in and saw that it was the treasure-room of the merchant, the place in which was stored the less bulky of his riches. There were heavy chests for gold and silver bars, cases for jewelry and precious gems, and such other forms of wealth as vases, bronzes, golden lamps, and costly vessels of various kinds.

"Let me tell thee a story, son of Egibi," said she, seating herself on a bench outside, beneath the portico of the wall. "The great king Assurbanipal, who is dead, lo, these twenty years, gathered spoil from the four quarters of the earth, until his palace on yonder mound—" and Istar-bela pointed in the direction of the great high platform whereon the royal palaces stood—"was full of the peculiar treasure of kings. Gold was heaped upon silver, and silver upon gold, till the treasuries were filled. Then, O Omar, did the mighty Assurbanipal secretly delve into the brickwork of the mound and dig chambers, and when these chambers were digged the slaves who did the work were all gathered together by the chief eunuch in one chamber in the heart of the mound, and this chamber was closed as one closes a jar. The next day was the chamber opened by the chief enunch, who saw that all the slaves were dead, and one by one in the darkness and by stealth he carried the dead to the edge of the mound and cast them into the swift Tigris. And no eye beheld him. Then the chief eunuch removed the riches of the king to the hidden chambers in the midst of the mound. The golden bars of Carchemish, the royal manehs of Babylon, talents of gold and shekels of silver, the coined gold of Lydia, the unrefined gold of Padan-Aram, the dust of the gold of Egypt, and in chests of cedar, and in costly jars and vases he

put as thickly as the sands of the sea all manner of precious stones. And none knew thereof save the king and the chief eunuch.

"The king Assurbanipal gazed with evil eye upon the chief eunuch, and gave him drink of the cup of death, and the chief eunuch went down the way of death. Assurbanipal said to himself. 'Lo, no one save I knoweth the secret place of my riches.' But the eunuch, knowing the ways of kings, had told his brother whom he had brought from afar, and his brother pined for revenge and riches. With money of the eunuch he bought an estate not far from the royal mound, and taking in with him certain thieves they began to dig like a mole, underground, from the house which was in the midst of his estate toward the royal mound, and the soil that was taken out of the earth, when night came on, they cast into the Tigris. And as they proceeded they measured with a measuring reed, until they came beneath the royal mound, into which they did pierce upward to the treasure vault of the king. I know not what became of the thieves, son of Egibi, nor how much wealth they obtained, but surely it was no great drain on the hoard of Assurbanipal. Enough it is to say, the underground passage—The Passage of the Thieves, as it came to be known—was discovered and blocked up, and the memory of it was forgotten save by a few. When my lord was prince he dwelt in the place of Assurbanipal, the king his father having taken up his abode in the older and larger palace of Sennacherib, which, thou knowest, is on the same mound. In those days Prince Sin-sar-iskun loved a captive maiden of his father's court, and, being let into the secret of the underground passage he asked, and the king did give him the house of the thieves. Sin-sar-iskun—may his gods before his feet his enemies cut off—secretly made large the passage, paved and vaulted it with brick, as the great drains of the palace are paved and vaulted, and in the house he placed the woman who had obtained grace and favour in his sight. The man

who oversaw the work was an eunuch, now the chief eunuch."

"I will lay up thy words in my heart, O Istar-bela, and it is an understanding heart."

"In time the gods deserted the king, and he died, and Prince Sin-sar-iskun, whom Sin installed, sat on the throne of his father. The gods withdrew their faces from him, and, the hoard of Assurbanipal having vanished in the wars, he borrowed money at the current rate from the great house of Egibi, giving with other things as surety the house in which dwelt his chosen. Failing to pay interest or principal of his debt, the house passed to the Egibi, though they at first declined to accept it, and acted so nobly in this and other matters that the king will ever remember them and particularly Omar, the Wise. The favourite of the king removed to the palace of Sennacherib, where her lord had moved his court when his father passed to the assembly of the dead. Such is my story, Omar."

"Thy words are as an honey-comb, noble Istar-bela. Was this passage ever closed?"

The favourite arose and beckoned him to follow. She walked into the first of the rooms used by Omar as a treasury, and then through a doorway into a room beyond. The partition wall between the two rooms was very thick. Turning to the left, she searched for a certain spot in the wall, finding which she pressed upon it heavily with her thumb. She clapped her hands together smartly and exclaimed, "Open!"

Omar, watching where she watched, heard a creaking noise, and suddenly the alabaster slab turned inward upon rusty hinges, and they saw Zirya the eunuch standing in the dark opening thus disclosed.

"Behold the Passage of the Thieves," said Istar-bela. "Step forth, faithful Zirya."

The merchant was astounded, and also rather crestfallen that he had been so careless about his treasury.

"Did Zirya," he asked, "since leaving us in the garden, go to the palace and return?"

"While I related to thee the history of this subterranean road he went and came. Close it," she ordered.

The eunuch pulled the slab back into its place as part of the wall, showing Omar the simple mechanism of the bolt.

"Open the other door," Istar-bela directed.

Zirya stepped to the wall separating them from the small court and suite formerly occupied by the favourite. Here was a shallow embrasure further indented with one of the common niches reserved in all houses, rich and poor alike, as a shrine for a household god. Zirya pressed upon the stone slab below the niche, which, after some exertion, he slid aside until it disappeared in the wall. There was another slab beyond, and this he also slid aside. Omar stooped and peered through the aperture. He could have stepped into the former apartment of the favourite.

The merchant stroked his beard. "There is a saying which they were wont to speak in the old time," said he. "'Into the well which supplies thee with water cast no stones.'"

The favourite smiled good-naturedly over his discomfiture.

"Our Zirya called to my mind this way of flight for thee. Thou art safer in case of surprise."

"Surely it does permit escape from these grounds—but where to?"

"Is the passage clear, Zirya?"

"It is clear and dry, my mistress."

"Zirya has made secure Assurbanipal's sunken chambers and their approaches. In them thee and thine could flee for refuge and remain for a length of time, or, the pursuit becoming eager, we could let thee out upon the Tigris through the disused stairs which lead off the old banquet hall of the palace of Sennacherib."

A second time was Omar astonished. "Then the great king can escape from Nineveh whenever minded to go!"

"The great king hath no cause to escape," responded Istar-bela, haughtily. "He is in the palace of his fathers. From there he will never flee."

"Pardon my hasty speech, gracious mistress. It was an unworthy thought."

"Say no more, merchant. The king will yet sweep away the attacking foe. The way of escape for thee is through the Long Corridor. It was the banquet hall of the great king's fathers, but since there is no more feasting and revelry, but only penitence and prayer, the king uses it as his promenade. At the far end, where once sat Sennacherib and, from behind a great curtain, gazed down the hall upon long rows of noblemen, and tributary kings, and princes eating his food, there is an altar before which Sin-sar-iskun spends days and nights, in contrition and abasement. In the side of this long hall is a concealed door admitting to a stair-case, which has not been used for years. From this stair-case one can step into boats, and in the darkness of night escape to the other side of the river or drift down the stream to a less perilous landing. Thy horses, too, could be got out by that way."

"We will delay not our journey. Our enemies are powerful and compass us about. For my stuff I have no care; the seal of the Egibi protects it, and with my steward, as with Jehu, fortune and life would I trust. For Sherah is it that I have fear."

"She may join my women, among whom is concealment. I will be surety for her."

"Thy kindness doth overwhelm me. It shall be so."

"It were well to change thy treasure-room, Omar. Others may find the Passage of the Thieves."

"This day shall it be done. In the blackness of the early evening will our horses be sent to Zirya, and by morning we can be beyond the danger of capture."

"Zirya, whom I trust, and whom thou must trust, wishes to question thee, Omar."

"Speak freely," said the merchant to the eunuch.

"It is of thy kinsman, master of plenty," Zirya began, deprecatingly, as one who commits an impoliteness but apologises by the tone of his voice.

"Talmai son of Mathan; a Nabathean is he."

"There were other sons of Mathan—men who were warriors before Talmai was born."

Omar gazed at Zirya with wide open eyes. "By the rod of affliction! Thou art——"

"Zirya, chief eunuch of the great king, am I. The gods who assemble every morning to apportion to each man his lot for the day take not eunuchs into their consideration. I pray thee, merchant, let no hint of thy thought escape thee. There is one more question I would ask."

"Ask it."

"Does the young Talmai hold dear the Jewess?"

"With the love of man for woman."

"Next to my duty to the king, my master, her safety shall be my concern."

"Ye are my friends, and to your loving care I commit her."

After deciding on a plan of action, Istar-bela and Zirya departed. The merchant went forth to find his wards, and met Itti-Bel wandering disconsolately about the garden. Together they sought Talmai and Sherah, who had not stirred from the bench.

"Hark thee, Ionian," remarked Omar. "Hast thou read the words of the wise and their dark sayings?"

"I fear not, my lord."

"Tie this about thy neck: 'When love is intense both find room enough upon one space of the bench; afterwards they may find themselves cramped in a space of sixty cubits.'"

The lad did not reply, and presently they joined the lovers.

"Make me full of joy with thy countenance, brother of my father," said Talmai. "It is as we wish."

"Is it so, indeed, Sherah?" asked Omar.

"It is so, my father."

"May the lord bless you and keep you. Defer your betrothal, my children, until the royal Mathan gives his consent, that he may bestow upon you a blessing."

"Let us hasten to him," answered Talmai.

"It is of that I would speak. Art willing to start at once?"

"At once—the sooner that we may be the sooner restored to each other."

Sherah turned pale.

"Thou, Sherah, wilt remain among the women of Istar-bela. Show thyself to no one outside of her apartments."

She clasped her hands in front of her and bowed submissively, but two rebellious tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Thou, Itti-Bel, wilt go to the chief eunuch, who will be thy friend."

"I will follow my lord Talmai!" exclaimed the lad stoutly. "I have his promise."

"What sayst thou, son of Mathan?"

"The Ionian has said it."

Chapter XXXI

TO THE PALACE OF SENNACHERIB

THE three horses and sufficient accoutrement were sent to the chief eunuch, and at the appointed time the merchant conducted Talmai, Sherah, and Itti-Bel to the room which gave access to the Passage of the Thieves. Omar disclosed the vault-like opening and handed to Talmai a lighted candle in a translucent case. To Itti-Bel he gave a small torch.

"Forward," said he. "We shall meet at the top of the royal mound." Before stepping through the opening in the wall Talmai closely examined the fastening on both sides. Then he held aloft the light. In front of him were stairs leading down into utter darkness. He stretched back his disengaged hand, and Sherah grasped it. Itti-Bel clutched her by the gown, and in that order they moved downward. Omar closed the aperture and went about his own preparation to leave by the main gate, which course was deemed advisable if the house was under surveillance.

When the sliding door closed behind them the three descended a long, steep flight of stairs to the level of the passage. They found it to be an arched gallery, taller than the tallest man, and wide enough for three men to walk abreast. The floor was of reddish brown limestone, and there was a high diapered basement line of pink and gray glazed tiles, walls of gray glazed bricks, a pink frieze and a gray glazed arched ceiling. So lustrous was the casing that the red light of Itti-Bel's torch shone in it like the glow of a distant conflagration. The mortar had been odorated with a diffusive perfume, and a lining of brick and sand prevented the intrusion of dampness and mould.

The novelty of the situation soon wore off, and the young people, as they walked rapidly along the passage, thought compassionately of the prince whose love converted a thieves' tunnel into a superb subterranean promenade to the abode of his mistress. They pictured him going to meet her, with eunuchs ahead and behind bearing aloft blazing torches.

At length they came to steps leading upward into the bowels of the royal mound, which they mounted without hesitation, ascending a much greater height than they descended from on entering the gallery, the merchant's house being on a level with the ground. Reaching a broad area they found their way blocked by a stone wall. Following Omar's instruction, Talmai beat upon the stones with his sword. A slab slid aside, revealing a room beyond illuminated by a torch held by a small black figure. It was a negro eunuch, trusted slave of Zirya, who bowed his head till it touched the marble tiling, backing as the three advanced into the room. Then the slave closed the stone door behind them and, with a pantomimic gesture denoting his muteness, beckoned them to come after him. They passed through two communicating rooms and ascended another staircase. Talmai realised, from what the merchant told him, that these were the old sunken treasure vaults of Assurbanipal, and so, that he might know the way back to Omar's house should occasion necessitate a retreat, he decided to learn the secret of the stone door. He called to the slave and retraced his steps to the room he had first entered from the gallery. The slave stopped, wondering, and Sherah and Itti-Bel watched his movements with curiosity. Talmai sought for the door in the wall, but in vain. The slave placed his hand on the panel and Talmai pressed a point indicated. The spring bolt worked, though rustily, and he closed the panel, and reopened, fixing the point firmly in his mind. Then he motioned to the slave, who darted ahead, and soon they emerged from the vaults into a room of the old palace

above. The slave, selecting an uninhabited part of the palace for his route, led them through a series of chambers, halls, and roofless courts.

The palace of Assurbanipal, though smaller than the palace of his grandfather, Sennacherib, was more exquisite in its decoration. The very pavement stones were engraved with tulips and lotuses painted in their natural colours, while the costliest products of the loom made every portal, with its arch of palmettes and rosettes, look like a brilliant bower; but it was in the carved alabaster slabs which lined the walls nearly to the ceiling that the art of the golden age of Assurbanipal was exhibited at its best. These carvings were in low relief, and represented scenes in the campaigns, the hunting expeditions, and the domestic and religious life of the monarch, all executed with spirit and fidelity, and illuminated not too frequently with vivid dashes of colour. Huge winged bulls of stone and gigantic deities chiselled on flanking panels kept watch and ward over these silent memorials.

Notwithstanding the grandeur of the interior, Talmai and his friends breathed easier when the slave led them through a side door upon the open mound. Far beneath them was the city. He halted them in the shadow of the wall and signified that they must wait.

From where they came out upon the mound the palace of Sennacherib was plainly visible even in the darkness. It loomed up on the flat top of a tier of terraces which were sufficiently lighted by fires maintained in elevated metal baskets to disclose its enormous proportions and at the same time reveal the vast extent of the mound. The terraces of the palace tapered on three sides only; on the west they were flush with the wall of the mound, and there the palace directly overlooked the Tigris from a height of one hundred and fifty feet. High as it was, however, there was another edifice on the mound which overlooked it. This was a temple tower, with its variegated stages piled one upon another in diminishing dimension and culminating in a gilded shrine which

caught and reflected the first rays of the sun in the morning and its last rays at night. Around the base of the tower were four temples, two to Istar, and one each to Nebo and Merodach. There the great gods watched over the fortunes of the house of Sargon.

The mound had been constructed upon the site of the original mound that had been erected when Nineveh was founded by a colony of Babylonians, fourteen hundred years before. It was seventy feet high, one hundred acres in area, and Sennacherib kept 10,000 captives hard at work for twelve years to finish it and the palace that surmounted it. It was made of earth and rubble, and cased on all sides with polished stone. The crude mass was pierced by small ventilating shafts, in which the warm dry air circulated and carried off any moisture that might have percolated through the marble top pavement. As a precaution against dampness passing up or down, there were immediately beneath this pavement two layers of large flat bricks, with a thick bed of sand between, and the lower course of brick was set in a bed of bitumen For drainage purposes the floors of the courts, halls, and certain chambers had each a round, grated hole cut through the centre of a stone set among the tiles of the pavement, toward which the floor gently sloped. From these openings there were descending pipes leading into conduits which terminated in main vaulted sewers, from which the sewage of the palace and other edifices on the mound was discharged. Soon Talmai saw approaching at a rapid gait a man, who on nearer view proved to be Zirya the chief eunuch.

"Thou comest at a favourable time, my lord," said he, "and the son of Egibi draws nigh."

He pointed as he spoke to the merchant advancing from the direction of the city stairs, attended by a torch-bearer.

"Is all well?" he asked of Zirya when he joined the group.

"All is well."

"The lady Sherah?"

"At thy word the servant of thy servant will guide her to the apartment of the lady Istar-bela."

"Then go, my child," Omar said to Sherah. "Trust in the Lord, thy God, and He will order thy way aright. Regard her, Zirya, as the apple of thine eye. Her estate in the days to come will be great, and she will requite thee."

"My reward is with me, my lord."

"Go, my daughter." The merchant tenderly kissed Sherah's forehead.

Talmai held her hand for a moment. "As at present we love one another, forever may we love," said he.

She turned to Itti-Bel with swimming eyes. "I will in nothing vex the heart of my sister," the lad said, as if in response to an admonition.

"Go," said Zirya to the slave. Sherah went without a word, the mute following her, and directing her footsteps to the private stairs used by women of the royal household.

The men started at once for the grand stairs, at the foot of which the guards saluted Zirya. In silence they ascended the long, easy gradient.

The palace of Sennacherib was grand and massive yet executed in such minutiæ of artistic detail that but one similar structure has been mentioned as surpassing it in magnitude, and, when the vastness of the mound on which it was raised and the richness of the ornaments with which it was adorned are considered, it is by no means clear that it was not as great, or at least as expensive, a work as the great palace-temple at Thebes.* The exterior in daytime, though unrelieved by windows and exhibiting few saliencies (which existed nevertheless) flared with a polychromatic splendour which dazzled and charmed by its remarkable blending of primary colours and their harmonious bestowal upon tre-

* Fergusson.

mendous stretches of surface. The great king describing its interior said it was "a palace of alabaster and cedar-wood, with coverings of white silver and shining copper surrounding all the doors." "The chambers of the women, the chambers of the men, and the porticoes are decorated with silver, with beaten gold, and even with massive gold," wrote another. There were priceless woven goods upon the floors, portières of threads of gold, hangings of white, green and blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble; there were elegantly carved and richly mounted couches, chairs, tables, and other articles of a refined and luxurious habit; and, finally, the multitudinous ornaments of ivory, gold, and bronze completed the dazzling ensemble.

The ground-plan of the palace was seemingly a maze, but was really a systematic clustering of chambers and small courts around three immense unroofed or open courts. Each of these great courts had its own function and the ornamentation of each was in keeping with its uses. They marked the division of the royal establishment into quarters for the commoner inhabitants and visitors, quarters for courtiers and guests of importance, and quarters for the king's own family. The walls were rarely less than twenty feet thick, and were everywhere very high, and everywhere lined to the height of six, eight, or ten feet with sculptured alabaster slabs. Often, in grand apartments, there were two and sometimes three series of sculptured slabs, one above the other, and in the entire palace there were not less than two hundred miles of them. The carvings were in bas relief and very graphically and minutely represented Sennacherib's campaigns of conquest, the capture and looting of cities, the punishment of "rebels" who had not surrendered at once, and like events of carnage and pillage, varied occasionally with domestic scenes and exploits of the chase.

Omar, Talmai, Itti-Bel and Zirya, after passing the guards, entered the palace through a magnificent gate-

way ninety feet in width and set between square, battlemented flanking towers, from the tops of which sprang masts capped with the royal standard. This portal was also guarded by statues of winged human-headed bulls, and between each pair of extended wings was an heroic sized, full-faced carving of the demi-god Gilgames holding a helpless lion clasped to his side under one arm, in the other hand a scourge.

Crossing this hall, the party passed a narrow doorway guarded by winged bulls into another roofed hall, smaller than the one they had just left, but adorned in the same rich manner. They met few persons and spoke to none.

Threading another gallery they entered the Court of the Courtiers, an open quadrangle fully one hundred feet square. In the centre of each side an imposing gateway lead into the congeries of apartments which were tributary to this court. Each gateway was guarded by colossal human-headed bulls and winged genii, and flanked by massive towers. The walls were covered with the most elaborate and highly finished sculptures.

Grand as was the Court of the Courtiers, the remaining court, lying beyond, on the southern side of the palace, and called the Grand Court, surpassed it in every detail. There the most solemn ceremonials of state were enacted, and none save the great men, those who stood in the presence, might enter it unbidden. A fourth court was the Court of the Harem, which was exclusively used by the king's wives and children and their personal attendants. This lay beyond the Grand Court, in the southwestern angle of the palace.

For Omar and those with him the air of the open court was refreshing, and the sight of the stars raised their spirits. Blazing lights on pedestals scattered here and there illumed the place, and the faces and attire of many richly clad men gathered in groups near the gateway or strolling around in pairs. Some of them intercepted the chief eunuch, asking if there was any fresh news of

the movement of the enemy. He assured them that they would be aware of any change in the situation as soon as he, and the answer was accepted, for news spread rapidly where the staple of conversation was the enemy and the daily reports of the astronomers and augurs. The king himself rarely went outside of the state apartments, or the Long Gallery, where he took his exercise and consulted with his priestly advisers.

"Son of Egibi," said Zirya to the merchant, "it were well for me to learn how our devices go forward ere we proceed."

"We are in thy hands, Zirya."

"Stay ye here for a while, I pray ye." Saying this, Zirya moved quickly away, disappearing through a doorway on the further side of the court.

Itti-Bel, with the trivial curiosity of youth, counted thirteen such doorways opening upon the court, each guarded by sacred bulls, and some having heavy curtains across them.

Chapter XXXII

THE CHAMBER OF DIVINATION

ZIRYA soon returned and in few words informed them that their plan of escape was in danger of frustration.

"If thou wilt follow after me, O Omar," said he, "it may end as thou wishest."

"We will follow thee fully."

Zirya sauntered around the court, as the Assyrians were doing, and the others took their cue from his actions. Gradually, however, he approached the southwest corner, where there was a doorway shadowed by curtains and colossi. Into this he disappeared and was followed by Omar, Talmai, and Itti-Bel in succession. The light at the entrance was very dim and as they proceeded it grew darker till, at the end of the passage, which was the narrowest and longest they had penetrated, they were in complete darkness. There a heavy curtain obstructed the way, and there Zirya halted them by stretching forth his arms. As he said nothing, they also maintained silence and waited. The passage was narrower at the ends than in the middle, the abutting walls forming recesses on both sides of the curtain.

Zirya listened. There were uncertain sounds—possibly echoes, he thought. Stealthily he parted the curtains, and Talmai, looking through the slit with him, beheld a small room very poorly illuminated by a golden lamp on a tripod standing in front of an heroic statue of Istar. In a swift comprehensive glance he observed that there were three entrances to the room, the statue being in the recess back of where they converged. In one entrance stood Zirya and those with him; straight across

from them, although concealed by a curtain, was the Long Gallery; on their left a similar curtain hung before the passage which led to the Grand Court. The huge image was garbed in the richest of robes and sparkled with the jewels which everywhere bedecked it. The face was faintly rouged, and the wide open artificial eyes seemed to be imbued with animation, so startlingly life-like were they. It bore no crown, and a fillet bound glossy hair in wavy puffs on each side of the head.

Zirya tiptoed into the room and listened.

"Persons, I know not their number, are in the Long Gallery," he whispered, on returning to his companions. "In silence be dumb. Sin-sar-iskun the great king must be in the gallery, where he walks. The room before us is the Chamber of Divination, to which oft-times he resorts with the priests. Oft-times, too, he remains there for hours. If the persons that are with the king are nobles, they will pass on to the Court of the Courtiers through this corridor, and assuredly will ye die. If they are priests, they will go on to the Grand Court through the corridor on the left hand, and ye are safe."

"In what part of the palace are we?" asked the merchant.

"Near the heart, as thou wilt ever be, and come out alive, my lord. The river is scarcely more than an arrow's flight from where we stand. Hark!"

A voice was raised in speech, harsh, and raucous as it grew in distinctness, a strident note in the night which sent the hot blood of anger rushing through the Nabathean's veins. The voice, with which other voices now mingled, approached from the direction of the Long Gallery.

The rustle of the heavy, gold-threaded curtain being drawn aside and the glitter of lights indicated that the speakers had come out of the Long Gallery and were in the Chamber of Divination. There was the odour of incense, and from this alone Zirya knew that King Sin-sar-iskun was present. The king, as high priest of As-

sur, an office pertaining to his kingship, had been observing a religious ceremony in the Long Gallery, where there was a large altar.

Zirya watched between the curtains.

First came wand-bearers, who parted and held apart the curtain of the Long Gallery. Then came two torch-bearers, and after them two more torch-bearers, walking backward. Censer boys appeared next, swinging smoking censers in front of the king.

Who would follow the king? Nobles or priests?

They breathlessly waited.

The words of Sin-sar-iskun were the first that the four listeners could frame into sense, uttered in a tone of calm, grave seriousness.

"'Tis vain to speak further of the matter," he was saying, as they entered the Chamber of Divination.

Zirya shrank back, for the king walked straight toward the curtain. As Sin-sar-iskun stopped ere he reached their hiding place, the eunuch knew from experience that the anointed one had turned about and with a wave of his hand directed his attendants to proceed into the gallery on the left hand and wait in the Grand Court whilst he completed his devotions before the image of the goddess.

Did anyone beside the king remain in the Chamber of Divination?

Zirya soon learned.

"Nay, my master and my sun," said one in whose voice Zirya recognised Suzub, the Assyrian priest next in hierarchal authority to the king himself. "Believe not that the god of the land has fled. None shall take Nineveh by force until the river itself declares war upon the city. Here, in this holy chamber, was the oracle pronounced. What sayeth the man of Ea to this oracle?" asked Suzub in a sneering voice.

"Yea, holy Dagon, the oracle of Istar doth insure the safety of our city," the king added.

"Oh, ye of short sight," replied the savage old man,

impatiently. "Even now the god of the river is strengthening it for the conflict."

The manner no less than the words of the powerful priest oppressed the king. He replied in a voice of foreboding.

"At the beginning of my reign a dream was revealed to me. Merodach and Sin caused me to behold a dream of a trembling earth, attacked at once by raging torrents springing out of the ground and by flames reaching down from the skies to meet the angry waters. Between them was I, the king, and I awoke with the fierce hisses of fire in one ear and the thundering rush of oncoming waters in the other. The interpreters of dreams said it was the salute of the gods of earth and air to my majesty, yet have I had my doubts."

"Vain! vain! vain! vain!" sonorously chanted Dagon.

"Oh, mighty king and lord," said Suzub. "Thou of the ancient seed-royal, whose sovereignty was established by Assur and Istar, whose rule Istar and Nebo love, permit no gainsayer of the oracle of Istar to win thine ear. None shall take Nineveh by force until the river itself declares war upon the city."

"Where the waters gush out of the mountain-side are gathering the gods of battle and destruction," broke in the priest of Eridu in a half recitative chant. "The waters of death are rolling hither, the god thunders on the ground."

The priest's words and the premonitory manifestation of an inspirational revelation awed his listeners. The king, deeply impressed with the faith that it was through some fault or remissness of his own that the gods had withdrawn their favours from his land, thus prayed in contrition while the oracle of Eridu remained in ecstacy:

"As a servant full of reverential fear for his mistress have I served the goddess Istar. All that is evil from her habitation have I removed. Her temple have I filled with first fruits and caused to shine like the new moon. The daily sacrifice and free-will offerings more than

beforetime did I multiply. In the way of the gods have I walked, in justice and righteousness have I governed."

"May all the gods intercede daily before Bel and Nebo that thy days be long, may they pronounce blessings upon thee," fervently recited Suzub, who dreaded the coming revelation of the renowned oracle.

"Doomed, doomed, doomed," broke in the Eridan.

"Look down, O Lord, upon thy servant who is full of grief," prayed the king. "Let the wind blow and forthwith deliver him."

"O mother goddess who art angry with him, he calls upon thee," prayed Suzub, prostrating himself before the image of Istar. "Turn thy face toward him and take his hand!"

"Many indeed are my sins," continued the king, prostrating himself before the image. "I have sinned in all; may this threatened evil pass away and depart to a place inaccessible!"

"O my goddess, who art angry with him," repeated Suzub, "he calls upon thee! Turn thy face toward him and take his hand!"

The odour of cense and sweetsmelling herbs crept through the curtains and the mournful prayer of the king and his priest gave an epic touch of sadness to the scene which affected the silent listeners. A pause full of dramatic tension was broken by the shrill voice of the priest, Dagon:

"White is the vision I see, white with tongues of liquid fire.
"Which creep from the snowy peaks like the warriors of the mighty Nergal.
"The river-god is bright like a burnished tablet.
"The curse flies before it, its cry is like that of a demon.
"All the land glows like the height of the sunset horizon.
"The sun at its rising removes not the darkness.

"Nergal is crouching at the great gate among the corpses of the noble and the slave.
"Nergal is crouching at the gate. Thou hast set his seat there."

"O spirit of heaven, conjure the curse; O spirit of earth, conjure it!" groaned Suzub.

"The foes have broken into the city, the waters of the storm give the corpses of the dead to the open places. O king, let the waiting men and the waiting women bind thee on the funeral pyre."

"I am ready for the sacrifice," answered the king in a loud firm voice. "Let the ancient law prevail."

"Red is the vision I see, red with tongues of flashing flames," intoned the oracle,
"Which lap the firmly built palace and shatter its thresholds.
"All the land glows like the height of the sunset horizon.
"And the sun at its rising removes the darkness.
"The curse flies before him, its cry is like that of a demon
"The gods smell the sweet savour of the sacrifice."

The king, grovelling upon the floor, chanted:

"Descend, O sun-god, the judge! descend, O Rimmon, lord of wells!
"Descend, O moon-god, lord of the crown! Descend, O Nergal, lord of the weapon!
"Descend, O Istar, lady of battle!
"Descend, O Ishkara, lady of judgment!
"Descend, O mistress of the desert, the Sassakhut of the great gods, the beloved of Anu."

The sound of a falling body interrupted the king's

invocation, and Zirya, whom a spirit of exaltation rendered incautious, opened the curtains wider to ascertain the cause of the noise. He beheld in the dim light the forms of three men upon the floor, the king and his priest in their full sacerdotal robes, kneeling, with their foreheads touching the tiles, and the priest of Eridu lying inert upon his back. The eunuch had seen the great king in this attitude before and he knew not how long it would continue. Time was precious, for after the moon threw its light up over the tops of the trees on the river, escape that night would be problematical. The western bank was held by the besiegers who maintained a close watch upon the city opposite. Zirya thought of these things and of the absolute certainty of death should their presence at that hour and place, as spies upon the king at his devotions, be revealed.

At the moment this thought was coursing through his mind he felt the curtain beside him move, ever so slightly, yet distinctly. A chill of terror crept over him. Withdrawing a step, he searched the obscurity with straining eyes. On his right appeared a faint luminosity, which slowly grew stronger and disclosed a rift of light between the curtain and the wall. The rift gradually widened, and a head darkened it, a head protruding from his side of the curtain into the Chamber of Divination. It was Itti-Bel. The lad had pushed aside the edge of the curtain and was peering into the Chamber.

Zirya fixed his dagger for quick service. Itti-Bel was almost within reach. Mentally Zirya measured the distance for a spring.

Suzub groaned.

"Oh, my goddess, let the evil pass," he prayed. For the priest was troubled in his heart. If the king gave himself as a holocaust-offering to the gods, the entire household of the king, including Suzub, might have to mount the funeral pyre with him. The oracle had lapsed into unconsciousness. Suzub must speak now, must

dispel the Eridan's teaching. This much was clear to the chief eunuch, for the contention between the rival priests was not new to him.

When Zirya looked again, Suzub and the king were standing reverently before the statue of the goddess.

Itti-Bel had withdrawn his head from the opening.

"O my royal master, my light and my life!" the Assyrian priest said. "Hearken only to the words of the divine Istar."

The king answered not, but his silence encouraged the priest.

"Because there are clouds, and mists cover the face of the earth, do the gods remove the sun from its appointed course? Because thy city is in a mist of foes, do the gods require that the royal sun of thy favour be withdrawn?"

The king answered not, but the wily priest knew he was listening.

"Vainly have I perused the writings of the ancients, O king of kings, for the law which commands the sacrifice of a king for his land. In the days of old it was commanded that the father give the life of his offspring for his sin, the head of the offspring for the head of the man, the neck of the offspring for the neck of the man, the breast of the offspring for the breast of the man, but even this law hath been superseded by the law of the gods, which instructs that a ram shall take the place of the child on the altar. Who is this man of Eridu who goes beyond the law? May he not be a creature of the enemy, who seeing that the lady of the battles and victory takes thee to her bosom, would impel thee to make way with thyself, since they cannot conquer thee?"

The priest ceased, and silence reigned for a brief period. Then spoke the great king:

"The divine archeress revealed herself to my father's father, yet withholds the majesty of her countenance from me."

Again the king sank down, with his face touching the marble floor, and, though Suzub had to imitate him, the few words spoken gave him heart, and he responded:

"The ways of the gods are mysterious, my lord. Put thy whole trust in the god of the land and Istar."

The remark of the king about the apparition of the goddess put a strange thought in the mind of Itti-Bel. He stepped noiselessly to the side of Omar, whispered in his ear and stole back to the edge of the curtain nearest the statue of Istar. The king was weeping before the goddess, and prayed with raised hands:

"How long, O Istar, shall I be afflicted? How long, O my mother, shall thy heart be angry? Thou writest the day of man, and none knoweth it. Thou callest man by his name, and what does he know? O my mother, thou givest rest not to thy servant. Let the wind carry away the transgression I have committed. My enemies have sinned grievously against Assur, the king of the gods, thy father, and against Merodach, thy brother. They have assembled their soldiers and encompass thy city. Thou, who art the archeress of the gods, throwing thy weight into the midst of battle, do thou, O great mother goddess, cast them down and pass over them like the whirlwind of a noxious storm."

The king's appeal ended in a wail, he grovelled before the image, and silence fell upon the room. Then, sweetly terrifying, like chimes in a death chamber, the goddess spoke:

"Fear nothing, O Sin-sar-iskun, since thou hast come before me, since thine eyes are full of tears, I will pour my grace out upon thee. None shall take Nineveh by force until the river itself declares war upon the city."

Thrilled to the innermost core of his being by the divine manifestation, the king drew his robe over his head to shut out the terrible majesty of the goddess, lest it make a cinder of him. Filled with terror, the Assyrian priest crouched beside his master and emitted a groan of animal fear. Instantly a slender figure darted from behind the

statue, and swinging a cloak dashed the lamp to the floor, where it fell with a resounding crash, extinguishing the light in its descent. In the moment of the confusion that followed Omar, Talmai and the eunuch moved swiftly across the Chamber of Divination, into the Long Gallery. There they were joined by Itti-Bel, who had daringly personated the goddess and thrown down the lamp. There was no time for them to observe the effect of the audacious stratagem of the Ionian. The noise made by the overturned lamp undoubtedly was heard by the torch and censor bearers waiting in the Grand Court. The eunuch plucked their robes for them to follow him, and ran rapidly and noiselessly down the dark gallery. Subdued cries and flickers of light warned them that the waiting slaves had rushed back into the Chamber of Divination.

Chapter XXXIII

THE DESOLATED LAND

NEAR the western end of the Long Gallery the eunuch stopped, and turning to the right fumbled around the wall for what seemed to the little party —who expected every second to hear a crowd of pursuers breaking in upon them—to be an interminably long time. Soon, in response to his pressure, a long movable panel of the bas reliefs swung back, and one by one he urged his companions through the aperture. Following them, he pushed the slab back into place.

"We are now at the head of the inclined way to the river," said Zirya. "Below us, brought hither through another entrance connecting with the king's stables, await your horses."

From a niche in the wall Zirya produced a lamp, and upon lighting it an inclined plane was revealed which dipped down into the interior of the mound at such easy angle that horses could pass up and down it.

"Fear not," said the eunuch, though the sounds of excited voices and persons rushing about in the Long Gallery now came faintly to their ears. "This door has long been forgotten by all save myself, and this entrance to the palace has not been used for many years."

Nevertheless, he felt anxious, and led them down the slope at a swift gait. By the light of his lamp it could be seen that the descending passage was panelled with sculptured slabs about six feet high, above which extended tinted tiles beautifully enamelled in diaper work. The carving on one side represented fourteen royal grooms leading fourteen of the king's horses down to the river to drink; on the other side, a train of slaves bringing various

kinds of food up to the king's table. On a projecting piece of wall, standing on the very spot where he had stood in life to observe each horse as it passed before him, was the statue of Sennacherib's Master of the Horse; and a very good Master of the Horse he must have been, to receive this honour after death.

Such the passage to freedom which the great king might have taken, but which, weak as he was, he scorned to use.

At the bottom of the slope, Zirya and those with him turned northward into a level gallery, at the extremity of which they beheld the reflection of a light on the polished casing of the wall. The light, they soon discovered, came from a large recessed chamber at the bottom of another, but shorter, incline. This chamber was flooded with water, in which stood the dumb slave waist deep, holding three horses in a large round boat made of wickerwork covered with hides and smeared with bitumen. Other boats of smaller sizes floated in the dark pool. A torch, stuck in a staple on the wall, shed a murky glow upon the damp and glistening walls.

"Open the gates," Zirya commanded. The mute dropped the reins and pushed sideways on a wide and lofty panel in the west side. Slowly it slid back, as in a groove, and they saw before them the swift, dark Tigris swirling by to the portentous music of its own rushing waters.

Omar could not repress his surprise. "A dangerous spot," he said half to Zirya, half to himself.

"For thee it is fortunate, son of Egibi," answered the eunuch. "For me it has been of good use in the past, but no more shall we have occasion to use it, and tomorrow will I have it blocked up. There is the open road, my lord," pointing toward the river. "Above, on the mound, the harem of the great king overlooks the Tigris. Watchers may now be on the parapet. Go in silence, therefore, lest ye draw arrows. Unto ye and thine, my lord, may there ever be peace."

"May there be peace to thee, faithful Zirya."

To the Nabathean the eunuch said: "If ever the eunuch of the great king can serve Talmai, the son of Mathan, let the wish be spoken, and it is a command. The lady Sherah shall be kept safely."

With these words he quickly withdrew and hastened up the incline into the palace, for he knew not how near or how far might be discovery.

The three needed no urging and embarked with the horses. There were oars for rowing and one for steering, and with these and the aid of the mute they propelled the boat through the opening in the wall and were at once caught by the strong current. The panel slid back and the river-side entrance to the palace closed forever.

Far below Nineveh, at the embouchure of a small stream, a successful landing was effected, and they took to their horses and started overland for Ardiban, seventy-five miles to the west. The moon was in the period called Bel, brilliant and nearly round, a frost glittered on the vegetation, and a chilling wind blew steadily from the northwest. The season was late. Near the coming of the sun's herald they deemed it prudent to seek an obscure place in which to rest. Talmai said there could be no better sentinel than his mare, and trusting themselves to the sagacious animal they rolled up in their cloaks, which Zirya's slave had packed on their horses, and slept.

Itti-Bel awoke first, and setting forth found a pool for his ablution. Having abandoned scullery work his hands had resumed their normal shape, thin and white for a lad, with a soft skin and long delicate fingers. He held up his hand against the sun and smiled lugubriously. "Wilt thou never learn to slay?" he apostrophised. "Will no murderous frenzy e'er possess thee?"

Banishing whatever grievance he harboured against his hand, he made his way back to Omar and Talmai, who were astir, and after a spare breakfast of dates and water they mounted and resumed the journey. The two men had discarded their heavy robes before leaving Nineveh,

and wore serviceable travelling cloaks and tunics. Talmai carried his formidable lance in addition to his two swords, but the merchant was unarmed, except for the indispensable double-edged dagger, which was utilised in different ways.

Before reaching the true Mesopotamian plain they crossed a range of low limestone hills, a small plain, and then a narrow strip of elevated land. Over all this territory, so near Nineveh, the armies of the besiegers had rolled like successive waves of the ocean, until it would seem that the harassed human increment had been swept out of existence. It was the policy of the attacking forces to lay bare all the surrounding country which could aid the Ninevites, and right thoroughly did they execute it. Nor were they the only scourges. Ready, like the sands of the desert to overrun unguarded lands, the Arameans frequently scoured the plains to pick up what the allies left, and they ravaged provinces which in the days of Assyrian supremacy they would not have dared to approach in hostility, for Assyria ever protected those who paid her tribute and took the feet of her king.

As they rode on, the extent of the despoliation became more apparent. Fenced cities there had been, with the palace mound of their lord or prince in the centre, and villages and country homes, and the numerous small farms and orchards of ten and twenty acres, all once teeming with a prosperous population, and all formerly dominated and protected by Nineveh. Now the fenced cities were turned into ruins, the palace mounds were as sandhills, the ditches were choked, the wells were filled, and field mice made nests in the houses. Where waving cornfields once glorified the dull earth, and flowers and fruits tinged it with prismatic loveliness, the savage scythe, and axe, and sword had passed as a besom and blight, leaving withered stems, decaying shrubs, and bedraggled blossoms. Nature, though, was slowly spreading her kindly mantle over the scarred and ravaged landscape. Lush growths of volunteer grain struggled with weeds, grass

carpeted the plain here and there, and patches of a bright scarlet tulip and other wild flowers occasionally asserted themselves amid the ruck of desolation and destruction.

At intervals, in the distance, upon mounds, or darting away from the ruins of what had been a home, human figures were seen, the remnant of the native population, wild as the wild beasts, cowardly, but savage and dangerous as ravening wolves. They extracted, somehow, from the bruised fields the wherewithal of life, and clung with the fierce tenacity of ownership to the acres that had descended from father to son. Desolate though it was, the plain was instinct with vital purpose, man sullenly opposing the wrath of war, and the desert firmly advancing its outposts of thorn and sand.

From a peak which they ascended to take bearings, part of the once densely peopled plain stretching west and south to the Euphrates lay exposed before them. Huge palace mounds and charred temple-towers reared their battered hulks as far as eye could scan, and broken city walls appeared as gray and tawny heaps.

Upon all the battle shout had fallen.

On the west, almost at their feet, was a skeleton of a large city, voiceless and void, its walls broken, its gates dismantled, its battlements cast down. Ugly black marks of fire tarnished the great central tower, where formerly the rays of the rising sun on its gleaming summit flashed westward the message of a new-born day, while priests chanted the morning hymn.

"This country, my lord, depends on irrigation for its life?" Itti-Bel said to Omar as they rode along.

"Without it the soil would dry up, Ionian."

"In a few years, then, this plain will be a dry land and a desert?"

"War has turned many a fruitful land into barrenness. When peace returns, and with it an established people and throne, these fields and orchards will yield their fulness as of yore. It is now a land of no government."

"But should the land continue in neglect?"

"Such fertile soil could not be long neglected. The world is not so large that men pass by land which can support a nation."

"If, however, son of Egibi, desolation should be everlasting?"

"Why, the streams would become clogged with reeds, the tamarisk and willow spring up along their courses, the banks be gnawed away and the overflow stink in the hollows. Water lilies, flags, and rushes would choke all channels, and where water reached not the parched earth would crack and give forth deadly poisons. But 'tis folly, Ionian, to imagine vain things. This plain has supported more people than all Greece and Ionia contain, and will continue to do so to the end of time."

Itti-Bel said no more, but fell to the enjoyment of new surroundings, for they were passing out of the zone of complete desolation created by the enemies of the Assyrians into a region which though periodically ravaged had not been laid waste. The Sukhi, or Shuhites, and kindred Aramean tribes now wandered at will over this vast stretch, exacting tribute from those tillers of the soil who remained, and giving them protection in exchange. For years the house of Egibi had maintained a caravan trade through the lands of this powerful Aramean tribe, and Omar was known to all the chiefs.

Near sunset they saw at a distance the tower of a large ruined city, and Talmai advised that they take shelter for the night, as he detected a coming storm. They rapidly descended a broad stone-paved road, and, following a stream of water which once supplied the city, they passed by a broken-down gateway and went clattering through the dust-strewn streets, rousing only the ghosts of echoes. The houses were crumbling to pieces, the temple buildings were tenanted by wild pigeons, and the very dreariness of the place sent a chill through the sensitive Ionian. They took possession of a large building with an enclosed court, into which the horses were turned, and after a scanty meal disposed themselves for slumber.

During the night the wind shifted abruptly from the northwest to the south, and rain descended in torrents, accompanied with thunder and lightning. The frail ruins were poor shelter, and the three friends were soaked by the downpour. Toward dawn the hurricane passed, and the sky again was as if its serenity never had been disturbed. The sun rose hot and panting.

Chapter XXXIV

THE STORY OF OMAR

"SON of Mathan," said Omar, as they rode out of the ruins, "doubtless thou dost remember our conversation with the Jewish maiden in the garden at the Ford of the Rising Sun. Ah, I see thou dost. At that time a thought arose in my heart, and I determined to dissolve the mystery of her parentage. It came to pass that a message from Kabtiya of the Egibi reached me at Nineveh, and informed me that one Ina, once a slave-dealer in Babylon, possessed the key to the mystery. I hope to possess it within two days."

"May it be as thou dost wish."

"As the maiden, if she marries thee, is to come from my household, it is well that thou shouldst know somewhat of my family. On certain things I should offend against the generation of thy children to be silent."

"Mine ears attend, son of Egibi."

"Know then that from the earliest days the family of Non, of the tribe of Ephraim, possessed fat fields in the plain of Jezreel of the ancient land of Israel, and its men were princes in the court of the kings of Samaria. In the latter days Hoshea the king conspired against Shalmanesar of Assyria, who went up against him in the valley of Jezreel and there broke the bow of Israel forever. The year after that Sargon threw down the walls of Samaria, carried the Israelites out of their own and into Assyria, and brought men from Babylonia and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; but Amasa, the son of Hadlai, who was my father's father, escaped to Jerusalem, to the court of Hezekiah the king, who received him gladly and ap-

pointed him to a place at his court. In the purification of the temple from the filthiness of king Ahaz, and in the great passover was Amasa known, and he prospered and my father prospered after him. When Hezekiah slept with his father, and Manasseh was king and built again the altars to false gods, my father withdrew to his estate near Anathoth, and there was I born into the world. The only son was I.

"Manasseh offended Esarhaddon, the king of Assyria, and was taken in irons to Babylon where the great king then dwelt, and during the years of his captivity Judea was nearly rent in twain by the factions led on the one hand by the nobles and on the other by the society of the Anavim. On his return to Jerusalem, purged of his own wickedness, Manasseh saw that if the house of David was to endure against the might of Assyria these parties must come together in the fear of God, and also that the bulwarks of the nation must be strengthened. In this did my father cheerfully aid him, and in those days Belisuna of the Egibi, father of Kabtiya, came to Jerusalem on a journey of apprenticeship, and, meeting my father's youngest sister, he loved her and took her to wife.

"The wedding rejoicing was hardly over when my father was sent as ambassador to Egypt to make an alliance of perfect friendship with Psamtik the pharaoh. I went with him. Bear with me, son of Mathan, for these are matters which thou shouldst know."

"I entreat thee to proceed."

They were no longer in a desolate region; on the contrary, many of the houses that they passed were bowered in fruit trees and inhabited by cheerful villagers, and there were fortified towns. The sun was effusive, but a cool wind blew from the Sinjar mountains, which lay in a long curve on the west and northwest.

"It was then, when thy father's father was king in Edom, that I and thy father met, at Petra which is on the road to Egypt as thou goest by the long way. I was but a lad, while Prince Mathan already had been num-

bered among the fighting men, yet we loved one another.

"My father found favour and good success in Egypt, and Manasseh honoured him and gave him riches. The hope of the king was Amon his son, whom he taught to walk in the ways of the Lord, and made to enter the college of prophets that he might learn the statutes and judgments. With Amon went I, and a certain Levite named Malluch. To this Malluch the friendship between the prince and myself was as wormwood in the heart, and he set a snare for me into which he himself fell. The prince dismissed him.

"In those days Kabtiya, the son of that Beli-suna of the Egibi who espoused my father's sister, came from Babylon and took to wife mine own sister. Sorrow followed joy when my father died.

"When Manasseh was gathered to his fathers, and Amon was king in his stead, I was governor of the city, but while I was finishing the repairs begun on the walls by Manasseh the ground was cut away beneath my feet by mine enemies, and a new governor of the city was appointed. Though in seeking the cause of disfavour my right hand encountered oil, I knew the chief of my foes to be Malluch the Levite. Hastened to the end by faithless advisers, and settling the affairs of the land with the careless ease of a fool, Amon the king sacrificed to strange gods. Jedidah, the queen, no longer saw his face, and she beseeched me to save him. With a stout body of friends, I broke into the palace on the night of a feast and delivered him out of the hand of the wicked. The king rejoiced to meet me, and the queen again took her place at his side.

"One night, as I slept, a friend came and cried, 'Awake, the king is dead.' It was indeed so, and soon the cry was raised that we who rescued him were among those of his servants who slew him. Our messengers to the palace returned with news that Malluch and his company had seized the government, and that the queen had

been overpersuaded to believe in our guilt. Even as we talked was the tramp of soldiers heard and torches lighted the court yard. So we fled."

Lengthening shadows warned Omar that the day was waning. White clouds were slipping over the top of the Sinjar range from the western side and disappearing in the deep furrows of the eastern slope.

"Through the lying testimony of Malluch my life was declared forfeit and pursuers were sent out to kill me. I took refuge in the hills with Jehu, my steward's son, as my only companion. My enemies hotly pursued after me, and, remembering the hospitable words of thy kinsfolk, I made my way south to Petra. Malluch and his friends seized upon my inheritance and divided it among themselves in the name of the king.

"Thy father sat on the throne of his father, and he granted me friendship, apartments were assigned to me in his palace, servants, and a portion of the king's meat. It was then a time of tumult for King Mathan. All the Nabatheans and the mingled people of Edom, Moab, Gaza, Tyre, with Dunanu of Gambalu, Urtaki of Elam, Samas-Shumukin, the kings of Arabia, and the Arameans that dwell in the desert had made a confederacy to throw off the yoke of Assyria and were preparing war. Back of them was the false promise of Psamtik, the pharaoh of Egypt. In the midst of the commotion came an emissary from Jerusalem demanding my return. Sternly did thy royal father turn him away. Then came another with offers of alliance and friendship, but thou knowest the Aramean law—not for an army would thy father give up the guest within his gate. Even did he frustrate my design to go secretly—"

"A noble father!" interjected Itti-Bel. The merchant and Talmai smiled at the lad's enthusiasm.

"It was then that we did take the oath of blood brotherhood.

"Assurbanipal and his Assyrians descended before the confederates had set their faces in battle array. He

smote, and there was war no longer. Petra was destroyed, and Mathan and his queen and two sons, and Vaiteh the Arabian, Ammuladi the Kedarite, and Adiya his queen, were carried in bonds of iron to Nineveh. Ammuladi was chained with the dogs, Vaiteh was fettered in the Gate of the Rising Sun, their chief men were slain, and their heads exhibited in the great places; but because that he was the inheritor of the Sacred Stone, and hence revered by vast numbers of Arameans, thy father was not slain. His power was broken, his people dispersed, and he transported to the Khabour. His two sons went as prisoners to the Supreme City. One died."

Talmai turned abruptly and gazed into the eyes of Omar.

"One, saidst thou?"

"Much remaineth for thee to hear, son of Mathan, and the light of day is fading. Of myself little more need be said. After the defeat of the Nabatheans I sent to the Egibi and procured pardon, and the Egibi softened the wrath of Assurbanipal against thy father."

He ceased, and after a pause Talmai, pointing to the white walls of a city which lay partly on the plain and partly on the purple foothills of the Sinjar, said: "There is an hour between us and yonder city, son of Egibi, and I pray thee to tell more of thy well-spent life."

With no more urging Omar resumed his narrative.

"The Egibi adopted me and took me into their business, and my soul became desirous of travel, and I longed for the diversion of commerce, and gain, and profit. Their affairs carried me over great waters. I went through all countries. I crossed all seas, but as Arcturus perpetually swings around the pole star so ever did I swing around Jerusalem. The young king Josiah served the Lord more and more with awe, and sinned not, the priests waxed strong, and Malluch, the better to establish his wickedness, numbered himself among the priesthood.

"In those days thy father, counting his sons as lost, took for a wife a beautiful young Nabathean of the seed

royal, who was thy mother. I, being a guest at the wedding, bethought myself of marriage, that my name and seed should not perish from the face of the earth. Among the daughters of the Egibi was a maiden who turned from the worship of Bel and would not make the sacrifice demanded of every Babylonian woman. My sister taught her the way of the God of the Jews, and this maiden I took to wife. The rejoicings and the feasts were not yet over when a message came that pardon awaited me from King Josiah, who had convinced himself of my innocence of his father's blood. Not for a while did I turn my face to Jerusalem, though now that the gates were open to me I might have hastened hither. There came the time of my wife, and a child was born to us, son of Mathan, a daughter. Then I journeyed to Jerusalem with my family, and the king honoured me, and set my seat high."

They had now got to the well-fortified city of Singara, which paid tribute to the Sukhi, a mixed city of Arameans, Assyrians, Syrians, descendants of that strange race known as Hittites, with odds and ends of Jews, Phenicians, and Babylonians. There the travellers spent a refreshing night, and in the morning set out for Nisibin, taking a road which led them over the Sinjar range, the summit of which still held snow in sheltered nooks. From the summit Omar pointed to an elusive white spot in the long reach of green that spread out before them and said it was Nisibin. Beyond it, on the north, rose peak by peak across the horizon, the white-capped mountains that fed the sources of the Tigris.

The road down to the plain, though devious, was constructed for the passage of armies, and in an hour they put the Sinjar behind. At Talmai's request the merchant resumed his narrative.

"None seemed to rejoice more over my return than Malluch, the priest, yet adder's poison was under his lips. In the eyes of the king he was a zealous servant, so when my inheritance was restored to me he was given

another estate. Into the house of my father, therefore, went my wife and child, and there came to me the happiest years of my life.

"I was lying on the top of a mast and knew it not.

"Malluch made excuse to visit my house, but I trusted him not, and kept the door of my lips. Then sudden destruction came. Word reached me in Jerusalem, on a day when I was held on the king's business, that a band of marauders had broken into my house at Anathoth, killed my sick wife, and stolen my daughter."

Again Omar paused. The bold simplicity of his declaration shocked Itti-Bel, and the eyes of the grave young prince filled with sympathetic tears. Omar continued his narrative in the dry voice of one who had passed the time of weeping:

"There was search and the agony of disappointment as each rumour proved vain. Skythians retreating fom Askalon, the remnant of that red swarm which years before had passed over Judah, were said to be the murderers. Why, thought I, attack my house and leave others nearly untouched? With dry tongue, I asked myself this question. My parched lips gave no response, but my burning eyes ever sought the evil face of Malluch. Jehu kept in his shadow. The priest we learned was in the neighbourhood of Anathoth when my house was attacked; he was seen conversing with certain rough strangers. My blood cried aloud for his blood and I killed him."

Omar lifted aloft his clenched hand. There was no excitement in his voice. "I hacked him into a hundred pieces, among which the shreds of his holy garments mingled with his flesh and bones, and the light of his shining jewels went out in a flood of blood."

Omar's uplifted hand unfolded in mute appeal to the Most High for justification of his deed. Slowly he lowered his arm.

"The people gaped upon me with their mouths. The judges decreed that I was smitten with madness and

turned me loose to become once more a wanderer in strange lands. Captured many times, twice left for dead on the field of battle, I tasted the bread of adversity and drank the water of affliction. At last the counsel of my kinsmen prevailed and I went again in the family of the Egibi."

Chapter XXXV

THE IDENTIFICATION OF SHERAH—NEBUZARADAN'S INVITATION

THE next morning they rode into Nisibin, a large and prosperous walled city of much commercial and strategic importance. In the division of the Assyrian empire between the Medes and Babylonians Nisibin had fallen to Media, and Ardiban to Babylon. Nisibin was on the highway to Lydia, and the king of Lydia already was preparing to meet the Medes in the shock of battle; Ardiban was on the highway to Egypt, and the Pharaoh was camped with an army at Carchemish.

The merchant sought the house of one Daddi, a Syrian, his agent there, and they rested. Omar sent out messengers. To Talmai he said "Wait."

One day passed, a second, and on the afternoon of the third, as they sat in the court of the house, there was brought before Omar a man of advanced years but sturdy health. His nose was short and curved, his cheeks were bloated, he had a round, double chin, a stubble beard, and shaggy eyebrows. His broad forehead was deeply rugated, his eyes were small and keen.

"Omar the Wise!" he exclaimed with evident pleasure, as he knelt and kissed the edge of the merchant's robe. "Happy would be I to salute thee as master."

"To-day, Ina, call me master, for thou hast been bought by my money. To-morrow, if thou wilt, Ina, son of Bel-edura and the woman Rimat, and father of the lady Harimtu, thou shalt call no man master."

The eunuch gazed with astonishment at the merchant.

Crossing his hands over his breast, he bowed submissively and said:

"Nothing is hidden from Omar the Wise. His slave awaits his command."

"Fourteen years ago thou wert at Malatiyeh, and there bought a young girl, who was sent to thy house in Babylon and raised by thy daughter Harimtu."

"It is true, my master."

"Freedom is thine if thou canst tell me whence she came. Otherwise, return to slavery among the Sukhi."

The wrinkles in the eunuch's forehead seemed to double.

"Reflect," admonished Omar.

"I have reflected, son of Egibi. She is the adopted daughter of the lady Harimtu. Will Harimtu suffer from aught I say?"

"No more than to lose a toy——Stay," the merchant paused. "I will tell thee that the maiden was chosen by Khar-mes the high priest as a Bride of Bel. She escaped and is in my keeping. Harimtu may suffer for her absence. I can help Harimtu to pacify the priest, but if thou dost set a seal upon thy lips I will not. Speak."

"Thy words are golden, son of Egibi. She was the daughter of a Jewish prince and was stolen from his house at Anathoth near Jerusalem by enemies of her father, who took her to the slave market at Malatiyeh. Her father's name I know not."

"Sherah," excitedly exclaimed Itti-Bel.

"That was the name she prattled. In Babylon she is called Shaghulla."

"Go, Ina," said the merchant. "To-morrow thou wilt receive a tablet of manumission."

The eunuch prostrated himself, kissed the hem of Omar's robe, and withdrew.

"Dost comprehend, Nabathean, why I related the annals of my house?"

"Clear as the sun is it, O Omar. Enlighten me fur-

ther, I pray thee—when was it thou didst learn she was thy daughter?"

"The thought came upon me at the Ford of the Rising Sun, but I kept the matter in my heart. To me her confused recollections were as light out of darkness. That she is the daughter of my dead wife her close resemblance testifies. It is a likeness which would have been perfect but for the hair. The mother's was black, and the daughter's has the sunny tint of an Amorite ancestor of mine own. The testimony of Ina was necessary to make me confident of this thing and be satisfactory to thy father. I knew of the man, and as Daddi my servant has close dealings with the Sukhi who held him captive, we came here, and he was sent for. The Lord in whom my fathers trusted did not forsake me."

"But," urged Itti-Bel, "if this Ina should send word to his daughter Harimtu——"

"He will send no message. He does not wish her to know he is with the living."

Having no occasion to loiter further, they departed from Nisibin, and after two days' hard travel southward they arrived at the modest palace of Mathan in Ardiban on the Khabour. The Nabathean chief joyfully welcomed his son and his companions, especially Omar, who saw with a sense of pain that the once powerful frame of Mathan was a mere shell, though his eye was still bright and his mind alert. Any exertion exhausted him and his days were little more than prolonged siestas. He entered eagerly into the plans Talmai had formed for a gathering together of the Aramean forces, but left the details of execution to his son.

The following day messengers were sent to Prince Nebuchadnezzar by Talmai and by Nebuzaradan, the Babylonian viceroy of the upper Euphratean lands. The Nabathean asked permission in the name of his father to lead an army to Nineveh, there to act under the command of the Prince. Omar sent a recommendation of the acceptance of the offer and the promise of the house

of Egibi that the Aramean force should be no drain on Babylonian resources. Nebuzaradan, at the instance of Omar, and from his knowledge of the situation, formally and earnestly indorsed the petition of Talmai. Envoys were also despatched to Aramean leaders acquainting them with the purpose of the son of Mathan and proposing union of forces. In villages near Ardiban, where they had been settled by Assurbanipal when Mathan was exiled, were many loyal Nabatheans who clung to their king, and in remoter regions like the Hauran near Damascus, in Edom and further south, were Nabatheans who acknowledged his hereditary overlordship. To all commands were issued to concentrate at Ardiban. The Arameans at large hoped for a strong Aramean kingdom that would absorb Sur, the capital city of the Sukhi, and even the metropolitan Palmyra and Damascus, though the subject was not openly broached. The supine condition of the Babylonians for so many years prior to Nabopalassar had given birth to this ambition. Its fruition would be impossible with a revived Assyria. Babylon had not at this time developed enough strength beyond its home sphere to create apprehension. Assyria alone was dreaded. Therefore Nineveh must perish, its destruction was a necessary prerequisite to the establishment of an Aramean empire.

These speculations and motives were very well known to Talmai, who intended to be the king of the united Arameans. Omar threw himself into the movement with his ability and wealth. For a financial lieutenant he selected Khaitu the Hittite, a rare survival of an extraordinary race of people who once ruled all the land thereabout and all the countries west of there, and nine-tenths of Asia Minor. The race had become practically extinct, but Khaitu claimed to be of pure Hittite descent, and as proof proudly pointed to his yellow skin, high cheek bones, large nostrils and protrusive upper lip, and by wearing turned-up shoes and hair in a queue he added

evidence of his origin which was peculiarly gratifying to himself.

In their conferences relative to the Arameans Talmai astonished the merchant by his intimate knowledge of not only the tribes and their every branch and faction, but of all the roads over the whole vast stretch of country between the Khabour and the Red Sea, and Phenicia and Canaan, and the water facilities and pasturage opportunities. He refused altogether to send to town-bred Arameans, or to those who acted as carriers for the trade of Babylon, Tyre, Damascus or Palmyra. Such men would be his if he were victorious, but in a crisis they were as reeds shaken by the wind.

"And now, O Omar," said Khaitu, after one of their conferences, "the Babylonian general Nebuzaradan asks thee and Prince Talmai to meet him at table this night. Particularly he requests the presence of the son of Mathan."

"Wherefore, good Khaitu?" asked the merchant with anxiety.

"The fame of the Nabathean as a hunter has reached his ears. In Nebuzaradan is no guile. A brave soldier, violent of temper perhaps, but a true man. I hold his note for many maneh and esteem it with the golden bars of Carchemish."

"He is the perfect type of the highbred Chaldean," said Omar.

"At Ardiban he maintains a viceregal court of much sumptuousness," continued the Hittite. "Upon all comers he lavishes entertainment and gifts, seemingly with the careless ease of a prodigal fool, yet, like a tigress whose eyes search for prey even while she plays with her young, the eyes of Nabopalassar's general look longingly across a narrow stretch of land to where, at Carchemish, scant four days' journey toward the setting sun, the Egyptian Necho keeps guard over his conquered provinces of Judea and Canaan, and, like a hawk resting upon

a high tree, gazes with hungry eyes toward Ardiban. Here, like vultures gathered for a feast, have come from all quarters stout-hearted but light-pursed adventurers to feed or fight, the spies and emissaries of other nations to observe how prospers the war against Assyria, and the mixed multitude which assembles wherever there is rumour of spoil. Here are soldiers and singers, merchants and ambassadors, musicians and tribesmen, Syrians, Cappadocians, Babylonians, Jews, Phenicians, Arameans, and Greeks, all mingling and with strange women carousing. To such of these that smell not illy Nebuzaradan, for the good they may do him, gives place at his prodigal board. There, O Talmai, thou mayst learn the politics of our western nations, and there, O Omar, thou mayst study mankind and ponder over his frailties."

"We will go, my friends," said Talmai.

Come With Me Into Babylon

Book III

BOOK III

Chapter XXXVI

THE BANQUET AT ARDIBAN—THE RIVAL JEWISH ENVOYS

"IT is told of thee," said Nebuzaradan to Talmai during a pause in the music at the banquet, "that Ninip and Nergal, who love brave men, have conferred upon thee power over wild beasts."

"The power of two arms, mighty prince," replied the Nabathean, with a smile. They sat in a raised alcove room where the host and his special guests of honour could look down the long chamber in which the motley throng was disposed at many tables. Huge vases on the side of the splendid hall were replenished with mixed wines, no matter how rapidly the cups were emptied. Dozens of diaphanously-attired damsels waited upon the guests and were attendant or companion as mood or mating led the fancy. The atmosphere was turgid with the odours of meats, the reeking perfumes of the banqueters, and the emanations of the flowers which glorified the painted walls above the rows of coloured bas-relief.

"Truly a gift of the gods," Nebuzaradan said in response to Talmai. "I love the chase, and in the days when the star Cacsidi rises the thick forests invite me. In all the provinces and all the lands of Assyria, in Khana, the land of the Sulime, the Haran, and the land of Nairi have I hunted, and the wild beasts of mountain and plain and the mingled birds of heaven have fallen beneath my arms. Among princes—" and Nebuzaradan made a polite motion toward Talmai—"There is no more

excellent diversion, except war. Therefore should we not complain to the gods for lack of variety. While we are not slaying wild cattle we may take delight in the noble sport of slaying men. Which is thy choice, son of Mathan?"

"A difficult question, Babylonian—yet, as I think it over, not so difficult. In lightness of heart I would choose the wild beast, but when the battle cry rings out among men there is only one use worthy of lance or sword."

"Ah, by Nergal!" exclaimed Nebuzaradan, slamming his clenched hand upon the table. "Thou hast uttered my thoughts. Albeit hunting has its perils."

"Yes, to the hunted," said the Hittite.

"Thou hast hunted the aurochs, son of Mathan. Thou art chasing the great beast in the fens of Haran. With his heavy shoulders and sturdy neck, the unwieldy monster has forced a way through rush and willow, and with his short thick horns has left behind him a gory train of dying dogs, that moan and whimper as thou dashest by on thy horse. At last he gains the reedy basin in which is sheltered his female and his young. No further will he flee, but makes his stand and waits in sullen silence for the foe. Something tells thee to beware —silence perhaps, or the croak of a frog, or the sudden whir of a wild fowl—and thou dost rein thy horse and fix an arrow. Thou seest a spot in the rushes shake, they part, and then with a roar and a crash the aurochs is upon thee. Even as thou dischargest thy arrow thou notest his red, angry eye, the crimsoned horns, the spot of blood on his mane, and the froth about his mouth. The barb sinks deep in his side, but the aurochs heeds it not. Quick! or thy horse is pitched in the air by the furious bull, and thou art under his sharp hoofs. Ah! that was close! Canst thou not see the horse whirl, son of Mathan? By Nergal! There goes another arrow deep into the aurochs' panting side. He staggers, drops to one knee, and with a bellow that startles every denizen of the forest he raises his huge bulk for a deadly rush.

"He trembles from wounds and exhaustion, and his eyes glow like burning coals.

"His stomach retches where the arrow cuts it, and he coughs bloody ooze from his lips.

"He paws the damp earth and bellows. He shakes himself to ease his tortured body of the barb that scrapes his ribs.

"But ere he can plunge forward the belated hounds, with yelp and snarl, are upon him. While some are ripped by his horns, others fasten upon his quivering flanks and matted mane. With a despairing bellow, he frees himself and charges thee, but, poor brute, thou needst only to give him the finishing arrow. As it pierces his thick hide he lurches, totters, then slowly sinks to his knees, and with a low roar of anguish his great body falls helpless before thee in the agony of death. Bubbles blow from his red nostrils, and his hind legs feebly lash the air. The last breath of life goes out in a long drawn sigh."

This description of what the hearers felt must have been a reality was followed by a silence which was broken by the sarcastic voice of the Hittite.

"After which thou didst pour a libation to Ninip and praise the gods for what thou hadst accomplished," he said.

"Why, my bitter trafficker, no quarrel have I with the gods, as thou dost seem to have."

Khaitu grunted scornfully.

"He who fears not the gods," continued Nebuzaradan testily," will be cut off even as a reed. He who honours not his goddess will see his bodily strength waste away."

The Hittite was too wise to press the choleric Babylonian, but he was full of spleen. Opposite him sat a pale-faced and plainly-attired young Jew, the representative at Ardiban of the anti-Egyptian faction in Judea, who felt keenly the Egyptian yoke upon his country. Him Khaitu thought to bait.

"Are the gods of the Nile, then," he asked Nebuzara-

dan, "better than the God of the Jews, that they should have the dominion over Jerusalem? Have not the Jews given over His city into the hands of their enemies?"

Nebuzaradan laughed. The matter was not worthy of his serious consideration. The young Jew flushed with indignation.

"The Egyptians are men, and not God," he said sonorously, "and their gods are the works of the hands of men. When the God of the Jew shall stretch out His hand He will defend Jerusalem, and defending, also will deliver it."

"Who is yon Jew?" Omar asked his neighbour, who was also a Jew. He was a young man of patrician bearing who half reclined upon a beautiful woman in the next seat.

"Baruch, the scribe, O Omar," he answered contemptuously. "A follower of that Jeremiah who by his rebellious utterances is causing much annoyance to king Jehoiakim." The words were spoken loud enough for all to hear.

If the other Jew was Baruch, thought Omar, then the Jew who spoke so contemptuously of Jeremiah must be Gedaliah the son of Pashur, the emissary of the royalists of Jerusalem, who were upheld in power by the Egyptian pharaoh Necho. Of both young men Omar had heard, though he had heretofore met neither.

The elegantly garbed aristocrat had more to say, and in an elevated tone of voice which bugled with animosity he added:

"This Jeremiah stands in the gate of the children of the people whereby the kings of Judea come in and go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem, threatening the king and the people that unless they do as he commands the Lord will kindle a fire which shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem. 'Amend your ways and your doings,' he shouts, flourishing his greasy goatskin cloak, for he pretends to be a prophet of the Lord; but the people only shoot out the lip and laugh him to scorn. He gathered around him

pestilent fellows in one of the chambers of the temple in the floor above that of the keeper of the door, and there, by the violence of his words, drew attention to his unclean person, hesitating not to denounce the king himself. There were many who would have laid strong hands upon him, had not the king, despising the stinking knave, commanded them to peace. Waxing bold, he forsook the perch from which he croaked, and went down into the court of the Lord's house, and there shrieked a foolish prophecy unto the people from all Judah which had come to worship."

The son of Pashur ceased, and a sneer distorted his handsome face. All eyes turned upon the scribe, and all ears awaited the answer due from him. The sudden change in the conversation, as it gave promise of heated words, perhaps blows between the rival envoys, interested Nebuzaradan and Khaitu as a contest among animals might have interested them.

Baruch seemed lost in thought. He was debating in his mind whether he should reply. Perhaps he would not have answered but for the ill effect his silence might have upon the viceroy.

"'He that correcteth a scorner getteth to himself shame,'" he said, in a calm dispassionate voice. "The bread of falsehood is sweet to this man, but his mouth shall be filled with gravel."

He paused for a moment and then continued:

"Know Prince Nebuzaradan, and thou Omar son of Egibi, who once dwelt in the city of my master, that the word of the Lord came unto Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, in the days of Josiah, and ordained him as a prophet. After his victory over Josiah, Pharaoh Necho ordered Jehoiakim to pay 100 talents of silver and one talent of gold as tribute. Jehoiakim ground the face of the poor and collected this money for Necho. He set up altars to Baal in the house of the Lord and paid homage to the Eygptian queen of heaven, and the people sought Baalim and went after strange gods. Then came the voice of the

Lord commanding Jeremiah to speak unto the king and the people, to declare in Judah and publish in Jerusalem that unless they amended their ways He would do unto the temple as He had done unto Shiloh. O Jerusalem, Jeremiah prayed, wash thine heart from wickedness that thou mayest be saved! The people hearkened not, nor inclined their ear. So Jeremiah stood in the gates and cried to all to amend their ways, but they hardened their necks. They reviled Jeremiah, and Pashur the son of Immer smote the prophet and put him in the stocks.

"Then Babylonian," he continued in a solemn impressive voice, "the Lord spoke through his servant Jeremiah, saying: 'I will break this people and this city as one breaketh a potter's vessel. The whole city shall flee for the noise of horsemen and bowmen; they shall go into thickets and climb upon the rocks. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive unto Babylon, and shall slay them with the sword. Moreover, I will deliver all the strength of the city, and all the labours thereof, and all the precious things thereof, and all the treasures of the king of Judah will I give into the hands of their enemies, which shall spoil them, and carry them to Babylon.'"

The last words had not died away before Gedaliah, the son of Pashur, throwing aside the woman who clung to him, jumped to his feet.

"False Jew and false prophet!" he exclaimed with his hand on the handle of his sword.

"Hold!" thundered Nebuzaradan, wrought upon by the prophecy concerning Babylon. "Stay thy hand, thou puppet of Egypt, or I will forget thou art a guest under my roof."

The bare outstretched arm of the Chaldean pointed straight at the Jewish nobleman, who stared at Nebuzaradan in amazement, the distended veins in his forehead casting shadowy lines. The woman at his side plucked him imploringly by the robe.

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"I fear thee not, Babylonian," he said, in husky anger. "Thou hast dissembled in thy heart."

He jerked his robe loose from the hand of the woman and strode haughtily from the room. His leman hastened after him, and later one of his secretaries sought out those of his following in the banquet hall, where many of the banqueters were already intoxicated, and they too silently withdrew.

Nebuzaradan hardly noticed the departure of the Jewish envoy. He interrogated Baruch with much earnestness, and the scribe repeated to him the prophecy of the prophet.

"Whether an instrument of thy God's vengeance or not," said he bluntly, "thy master shall not prophecy in vain. My royal master, the great king, will appear before the walls of Jerusalem at the appointed time, but first these vermin from the Nile must be burnt out. Oh, that I could lead my army against the Pharaoh now! This delay and idleness is consuming my flesh. I have a lieutenant, an Ephesian, who could endure it no longer and went to the Haran to hunt. Yet here am I, with naught to do but fret."

Nebuzaradan sighed, and leaned back with a most disconsolate air.

"And fighting begins at Nineveh with the next full moon." The thought completely dampened the bold spirit of the soldier. "Thou, son of Mathan, wilt be there at the head of thy tribesmen. I would serve thee as a common soldier, if I could forego the honour of being viceroy here."

He sighed again and grew morose and silent.

The conversation became desultory, and at times ceased altogether while they listened to the playing of musical instruments and the lascivious songs of minstrels. Omar talked at length with Baruch, who convinced the merchant that Jeremiah had not only a large party among the common people of Judah and the old Anavim, but an influential backing among the princes.

The banqueters were now in a condition of riotous debauchery. Men and women mingled in shameless abandonment, and harps and cymbals, singers and dancers drew noisy crowds to this or that part of the hall where an instant's amusement varied the incessant drinking. The ribaldry invaded the raised alcove, where Nebuzaradan and his special guests sat, and Omar, Talmai and Khaitu begged permission to withdraw.

"I feed these hangers-on and fill them with wine," said he, in granting the request, "because it is to my royal master's interest."

Chapter XXXVII

THE STORY OF MATHAN THE EXILE

AT intervals, on the wide, shaded roof of the palace, when Mathan's health permitted, Talmai and Omar related to him the incidents of their intercourse and the attachment that had arisen between Talmai and Sherah. Itti-Bel, of whose possible departure for Ionia came no further mention, was always present at these reunions, for the lad had found favour with the exiled king. On such an afternoon Omar concluded the recital, and as he spoke the last words he placed on a small teak table in their midst the Amulet of Bel.

Mathan scrutinised it between the slits of his eyes. The great gem cast a rich, vinaceous tint over the wood upon which it rested, a tint which quivered sensitively as it disappeared into the sombre background or sombrely flashed back into the heart of the jewel, only to throb out again, and thus glow and shimmer in the unresponsive daylight. It seemed to the onlookers that the radiant stone was flashing a message to the aged man, whose face now bore the impress of one who listened. Slowly he lifted his hand to the front of his embroidered robe, under his long white beard. From a thin gold chain around his neck he detached an amulet and laid it alongside of the ruby. It was an imperial sapphire of the same size and shape as the ruby, the one burning with inward fire, the other sparkling with the velvety sheen of an azure sky reflected in a dimpling mountain lake.

"The Blue Amulet!" murmured Omar. "That it existed merchants, have a saying, albeit none among them has seen it."

"The Sacred Stone of Khammurabi," said the king. "Twin of the Amulet of Bel. Together they came to our renowned ancestor, Talmai, from his fathers of old. Take them in thy hand, son of Egibi."

The merchant did so.

"Put them end to end."

The merchant did so.

"Perceive ye not that once they were a single stone?"

"It is true, King Mathan. There is a blue tinge on the edge of the ruby."

Omar held them, end to end, that all might see. Their coruscations merged at the point of contact, the sapphire intromitting a purplish hue, and the ruby a tinge of violet, and they borrowed and mingled shades in a marvellous play of light and colour. The beholders eyed them, entranced, fascinated, so little like stones, and so like sentient things did they appear to be.

Omar replaced them on the table.

King Mathan leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes in self-communion.

"Listen, my son, and thou my friend, and thou, too, Ionian," he said, breaking the silence, "to that which men have told from their fathers about the Red Amulet which Khammurabi hung on the breast of Bel and the Blue Amulet which he left to his sons as a symbol.

"In the remote days there dwelt a king in a land far beyond the valley of the Nile, a land where the sun's shadows ever point southward, and this king had two sons that were twins. The laws of inheritance favoured the elder of the twins, but the king loved the younger twin more than all his children. Among the king's inherited treasures was a great jewel, long rather than round in shape, and though it was one perfect stone, half of it was ruby and half of it was sapphire. Upon its smooth surface was graven certain characters——"

Mathan lifted the amulets that they might behold the dim markings. "A gem which had been in his family from time immemorial. When the summons of the sepa-

rator came he called unto him the younger twin and gave him the gem. 'According to the law the first-born shall succeed,' said he. 'Disturb not thy brother, but take this Amulet, and when I am no more in the land go thou, thee and thy men, to the north, there to build for thyself a throne to all generations. Thy seed shall be known so long as this stone is cherished as thine and thy sons' inheritance. It is so ordained.'

"The king passed away, and the younger twin honoured him and went north, and from the beginning stablished a glorious high throne in the valley of the Kharid in Arabia. For years untold the kings left the gem as an inheritance to their first-born, and its fame spread among the Arameans.

"Again came twins to the royal house, and the king loved the younger twin more than all his children. When the summons of the terminator came he called the younger twin to him and gave him the gem. 'According to the law the first-born shall succeed,' said he. 'Disturb not thy brother, but take this Amulet, and when I am no more in the land go thou, thee and thy men, to the north, there to build for thyself a throne to all generations. Thy seed shall be known so long as this stone is cherished as thine and thy sons' inheritance. It is so ordained.'

"The king passed away, and the younger twin honoured him and went north, and from the beginning stablished a glorious high throne in the valley of the Euphrates. Times and seasons came and went and this jewel was handed down the generations in that house, and all the Arameans reverenced it, and acknowledged its master to be their master. Those kings, my son, were thy forefathers, and by the might of their arm they stablished their throne in the Land of the Bow, over against Babylonia."

King Mathan paused, and a servant brought him a strengthening draught. Then he resumed:

"In these days the Elamites did rule the country be-

tween the two rivers, but the kings thy fathers waxed in power, and at last Khammurabi the son of Sin-muballit attacked them and drove them back to their forests of pine and cedar. Khammurabi became king of Sumer and Accad. Babylon he chose as his chief city, beautifying it above all other cities and constructing therein the temple of Sagila as the habitation of the god Bel.

"When he had settled the god in his sanctuary, Khammurabi took the hand of Bel, and, breaking the great ruby-sapphire in twain, he hung the ruby to the neck of the god, and the sapphire he hung from his own neck, saying, 'thus I put an end to the wandering of my people.' But it is not in man to command the years."

King Mathan again rested, and his hearers maintained silence. After an interval he directed Itti-Bel to call his steward, Zabium, whom he instructed to fetch a certain lens which had the power of magnifying. With this he indicated that Omar and Talmai should examine the minute inscription cut in the stone.

"The characters are unknown to me, my lord, and I have seen many," the merchant reported after a long scrutiny.

"It is in a language of such ancient time that the memory of it is forgotten," said Mathan. "Unable, with all the learning of the Chaldees, were the priests of Babylon to decipher it. The language is spoken no more of men, nor among the potsherds and tablets of the nations do the scribes find the key to it. As from father to son it descended, so shall it continue to descend. As the shells of the seashore repeat the sounds of the ocean, so does its message pass from father to son, and thou, my dearly beloved son, shalt know. The part which belongs to Bel must be returned to Bel. Such was the will of our great and noble forefather. The part which belongs to thee, my son, is thine. Lose it, and thy seed shall be cut off."

"Yet, in scrupulous hands, my lord, might not the

Amulet of Bel serve thy house once more ere it be returned?" the merchant suggested.

"As thy wisdom directest, Omar my brother."

His father's strength had reached its limit for the day, and Talmai summoned Zabium, and the aged Nabathean retired to rest. The next day he continued his story thus:

"It is in my mind to make certain matters clear, for the end creeps on apace. It is of the Blue Stone I would speak. When the Kassites subjugated Sumer and Accad, the people of Khammurabi became wandering Arameans, and they separated according to tribes. One tribe prospered and after many years gave Babylon another king. Merodach-Baladan of the Chaldeans, the forbear of Nebuchadnezzar the son of Nabopalassar. Another, whose chiefs inherited the Sacred Blue Stone in direct line from Khammurabi, came to be known as Nabatheans. Thou, my son, art its chief after thy father, and as between thyself and the son of Nabopalassar thy claim to the throne of Babylon is straighter."

"It is so," said Omar. "The elder son and the elder house inherit."

"It was in my father's time that the Nabatheans made treaties of alliance and friendship with the Assyrians, and Esarhaddon he aided in the conquest of Egypt. In Edom, to hold for Esarhaddon the road between the Nile and the Euphrates, did he set up his throne. Assurbanipal, forgetting I was an ally and not a vassal, and setting aside the covenants of our fathers, sought to compel tribute and offering from me, and in my cities placed governors and tax-gatherers. Ere the confederacy I formed could move he hurled a mighty army upon Edom, and my cities became like a ruin of the deluge. My own captivity followed. Take thou a lesson from the Assyrian, my son. No time gave he for preparation."

The aged king again lapsed into silence, which he himself broke by requesting the merchant and the Ionian to leave him with his son.

"There is little to be added," said he to Talmai, when they were alone, "and that little has Zabium written on tablets. Zabium I raised that he might hand over to my son those things it was well the son should have. He knows naught but fidelity. When I join my fathers he will give thee the Blue Stone and such goods and stuff as I shall direct him to pass over. Do thou raise a slave for the same purpose. This Ionian—he would be faithful unto death—trust him. Remember that a name stained with dishonour is not worth preserving; it is thy duty to pass on to thy children with honour thy father's name. Marry the daughter of Omar if she is seemly to thee.

"I know thee Talmai, and unto thy hands I commit the destiny of our house, without fear or trembling. One thing more, and I am done. Thou knowest that thy two elder brothers were taken in bonds of iron to Nineveh?"

Talmai answered in the affirmative.

The old man's voice shook as he continued.

"It pleased Assurbanipal to make women of them. One is dead, the other lives."

"Lives!" exclaimed Talmai, uneasily.

"It is so. Zirya, the chief eunuch of the great king is he."

Talmai lifted his father's hand to his forehead.

"Thy heart will tell thee how to treat this eunuch, shouldst thou again meet. Into my house or my son's house he may not enter."

"So be it, my father."

"And now, my son, though thou hast inherited little of the world's goods from me, thou hast inherited from thy fathers a soul incapable of fear or dishonour. Thou hast learned to keep the door of thy lips—better thy silence be maintained forever than an untruth pass them. Confide in few men and not at all in women. Judge liberally, think purely, and love thy neighbour. These are but words. In the main things of life thou wilt be thine own judge and wilt eat of the fruit of thine own way. I

feel that thy hope shall not be cut off. Call Zabium and leave me for the present."

Talmai obeyed the command and sought out Omar, who was with Khaitu the Hittite. They had that day received the favourable reply of Prince Nebuchadnezzar to the request of the Aramean for permission to join in the siege of Nineveh. Nabatheans already had begun to report at Ardiban, and messengers sent to other tribes were returning with cordial and enthusiastic responses. Replies were forwarded at once, giving details, requirements, and naming Ardiban as the rendezvous. Few of the messengers sent to the wide stretch of country between the Khabour and the Red Sea, east of Palestine, and Phenicia and Canaan, where Talmai was known personally, had returned, but those few brought answers which evinced that he had underestimated his following in those regions. There dwelt the main portion of the Nabatheans. The Sukhi were divided by cliques, had no strong leader, and for some such reasons that actuated the Pekods were ripe for war. Including the Pekods and Gambalians, it became evident that at least 16,000 men would spring to his call, a force larger than was prudent to display before the Medes and Babylonians.

This phase of the situation was so grave that Talmai told Omar to send out messengers limiting the quota from each tribe, especially the rich and turbulent Sukhi.

Chapter XXXVIII

ISTAR-BELA'S LETTER—THE MEETING AT TABITE

"TO Omar son of Egibi, thus says Istar-bela the handmaid of the great king, the king of kings, the king of the four quarters. Upon thee be peace. Mayst thou be in good health and in favour with Assur and Istar. Behold, thus I send word.

"When Omar left Nineveh there abode in the king's house the lady Sherah. The lady Sherah is there no more. The lady Sherah has been carried off, but I saw not how she left the house, I heard not, and I know not who carried her off, not in the least. O Nebo, whoever has concealed her flight, I have as yet obtained no news of him. Zirya, the eunuch, is urging with haste the search for her present dwelling place.

"Another thing. I am a faithful servant of the king, my lord, but the rebels of the north and of the south, of the east and of the west are clamouring at the gates like wild beasts for his blood. I look this way and I look that way, and there is no light, but when I look toward the king, my lord, there is light.

"Behold, I have sent as messenger to Omar, the slave of Zirya. Let Omar care for him.

"When I hear of Omar's return I shall rejoice greatly.

"Written from Nineveh in the month of Iyyar, the fifth day, in the eponymy of Ina-ili-ya-allat, the chief of the bodyguard."

This letter was delivered by the black, dumb eunuch two weeks after Nebuzaradan's banquet, and within the hour of its reception Talmai with a small force—such men as were ready to move—was on the road to Tabite, to meet the Gambalians and Pekods. The Pekods, he

had learned, were already there. Tabite was a city of natural importance about half way to Nineveh, but now depopulated.

The word to advance spread like fire in stubble, and, rapidly as a dry valley is covered by a torrent after a cloudburst, the previously silent road to Tabite was thronged by a moving mass of horsemen. With tossing spears which flashed in the sunlight, with shouts and laughter they hurried to the appointed place. The first detachments were followed by more detachments, and later detachments, interspersed with supply trains of pack animals, and women of the chiefs and princes in covered carriages, on camels, and horseback, escorted by their special guards. Within two sunsets a continuous, clamorous line of humanity was stretched like a pontoon half across the lonely Mesopotamian plain. Among the first to follow Talmai came a heavy force of Nabatheans, with supplies for their prince under the care of Itti-Bel.

On his arrival at Tabite, Talmai was warmly greeted by Bani-ya and Banu-sin, the Pekods, who conducted him to their quarters, a house of former pretention, whose barrenness was now concealed by the rich carpets, rugs, and luxurious camp furniture which every man of rank carried with him to war.

"Know, sons of Pula, that I have hastened in advance of my forces to meet you. My brothers are ye, and it is as brother to brother I come. Besides the services of the two thousand brave Pekods here gathered, there is a matter in which you can help me."

"The sons of Pula, their men, their lands, and their substance are thine to do with as thou wilt," said Bani-ya. "Even though not an Aramean followed thee from Ardiban, we would go whithersoever thou didst lead."

"Men we lack not. Somewhere in Nineveh is the young princess who has been promised me in marriage. It is my wish to rescue her before the city falls, that in its ruin she may not perish."

This statement at once appealed to the romantic spirit of the young princes, whose fancy, as with all Arameans, had been fed from youth upon tales of love, adventure and rescue. Both enthusiastically and joyously promised their aid. Loyal and sincere though they were, the new sentiment bound them more closely than ever to the man who was not only their racial hero, but their blood-brother. Talmai was about to confide further in them when a Pekod captain of a hundred sent in a request for an audience.

"There is a great cloud of dust on the southern road, my lord," said he to Bani-ya, "which could be raised only by a large party of horsemen."

"It is the Gambalian," exclaimed the Pekod. His words were true, for soon Urman came dashing into Tabite ahead of his three thousand warriors, and they went forth to welcome him.

"A hundred years to thee, my lord, and to thee, my brothers," said the chief. "Thy faces revive me. The smell of men's blood I have not known since last I met thee."

He was soon informed of the occasion for haste and the desire of the Nabathean to gain immediate entrance to Nineveh. The Gambalian pondered over this problem.

"By Nergal!" he exclaimed. "The lad—Itti-Bel. Where is he? Nebo and Tasmit have given him ears and eyes for such an exploit."

"The Ionian?" replied Talmai, absently, revolving in his mind the suggestion.

"Ionian, Assyrian or Mede, man, woman or demon, though the star of Nergal shone not at his birth, Nebo drew near and endowed him with intelligence."

"He will be here shortly, my brother. His wit is keen." Talmai told his friends he had spent several weeks in Nineveh and had carefully examined the defenses. It was practically impossible to carry the city by direct assault on the walls, he declared, and starvation was a remote contingence.

The young Pekods were depressed by this view of the matter, but Urman bluntly remarked:

"Thou art leading us there, my lord, and Nineveh can be taken."

"Thy words are not prophecy, Gambalian, but Nineveh's days are numbered. Sometimes when men's strength fails the burrowing jerboa may undermine and break down stone walls."

They were deep in the problem at sunset when Itti-Bel was announced. The Ionian entered, handsome, smiling, exquisitely garbed.

"Thy quarters are ready, my lord," said he.

Urman jumped up and cordially embraced the lad. The Pekods were also warm in their greeting.

"By Nergal—no, by Nebo!" ejaculated the Gambalian. "Thou now lookst more like a Babylonian prince than when I saw thee last. And thou still carriest thy meat-slicer—nay, lad—thy sword. We will say nothing of it."

The last words, though kindly spoken, could not check the emotion of the Ionian on being reminded of the cowardice he displayed in the fight with the Babylonians. Sobbing, he fled from the room. Urman, taken by surprise, hesitated, and then followed him. A soldier caught Itti-Bel and held him until Urman came up. Rough in speech, but tender hearted as a child with those he loved, the Gambalian managed to make his peace with the lad. Itti-Bel asked only to be let alone, and Urman returned to his friends.

"Where is the boy?" Talmai inquired sharply.

"Forgive me, my lord," Urman replied, "Itti-Bel has forgiven me. Thou knowest I love the lad. For two hours has he been here superintending the fitting up of thy quarters. They are ready for thee."

Talmai took leave of his allies and went to the house selected by the Ionian and arranged by him for the Nabathean's comfort. It was fit for the prince, for Omar had determined that Talmai should make his appearance

before the Babylonians and Medes in a manner suitable to his rank. Chests and bales of goods were yet to arrive.

Talmai did not send for Itti-Bel, but learned that he was within, asleep on a pile of rugs. He stepped softly into the room and looked at the sleeping youth. He thought of the lad, happy in the knowledge of having rendered him a service, then receiving such a blow to his pride at the moment of exultation.

"Poor lad," he murmured, and lifting a large rug he spread it gently over the youth's body, for the nights continued to be very chilly. Then he noiselessly withdrew. Had he stopped to listen he would have heard Itti-Bel weeping with happiness.

The following morning Omar, with the dumb slave and a large detachment of Nabatheans, Sukhi and other tribesmen, rode into Tabite. The merchant explained the cause of his coming as four-fold.

"No savour of rest can I enjoy," said he, "while my daughter's safety is in doubt. Therefore will I join the circle of those about Prince Nebuchadnezzar to aid thee in rescuing her and watch over thy interest. To thee I may be of service in procuring entrance to Nineveh. Finally, O son of Mathan, I bring a warning. We have a proverb which says that he that raiseth high his gate seeketh destruction. Notwithstanding our letters to stop them, the Arameans are rushing in great numbers to Ardiban. Instead of two or three thousand Nabatheans, five thousand are here or near at hand, and we must set bounds. Instead of allies of the great king, we may be but as birds hastening to the snare, should they question the intents of thy heart."

"What says the slave about the lady Sherah?" asked Talmai.

"Naught, for he knows naught. My fear is that the priest of Eridu has stolen her, my hope is that he is holding her for a ransom. The Amulet of Bel for the Bride of Bel."

"Didst fetch the gem?" asked Talmai.

"It remains with its mate in the keeping of thy father."

"This slave of Zirya, noble Omar, how departed he out of Nineveh?"

"In the silent language of the dumb he indicated that Zirya lowered him from the palace platform in a water bucket. Not altogether voiceless is he, but better there were no remnant of tongue in his throat. When he strains it to utter there doth issue from the black cavern of his mouth a sound like the whinny of a wild ass inflamed with love mingling its cry with the snarl of a desert hyena mad with hunger. This cry, son of Mathan, is to be his signal to Zirya to lower the water bucket for his return."

Talmai said nothing, but in the slave's method of leaving Nineveh he discerned a way of entering in.

The remainder of the day was devoted to despatching swift messengers with a view of halting at Ardiban the onward flow of Arameans. The Nabatheans alone were not restricted.

That night, after Talmai had retired to rest, one of the men of his guard informed him that a stranger insisted upon being admitted to his presence. The soldier was told to admit the visitor.

"He is not known to the guard, my lord," the Nabathean urged.

"Bid him enter," Talmai replied, wrapping a cloak around himself and sitting up.

The man who entered wore a fringed girdle folded about his head, with the ends hanging over the ears and neck, leaving the hair to fall in long curls on his shoulders. His tunic was short and checquered, but a long fringe reached to the heavy greaves which formed the upper part of his sandals.

"Health to thy body, and prosperity, son of Mathan. May the god who pronounces blessings turn his face toward thee."

"May health and prosperity be thy portion."

Talmai recognised in the apparel a shrewd imitation of the peculiar head-dress of one of the Aramean tribes, the Hagaru, and he knew the man was an imposter. The visitor spoke in Babylonian, and the voice sounded familiar.

"Will the son of Mathan hear my prayer and listen to my petition?"

Like a flash the knowledge of the man's identity came upon Talmai. It was Prince Nebuzaradan disguised as an humble Aramean, and with his face stained to a deep sun tan.

"Name thy wish," Talmai said, considering within himself, whether he would reveal his knowledge or wait for developments.

"I ask no more than to be numbered in thy army, noble prince. I can surely help thee."

"Why then art thou not with the Hagaru? They call me their lord."

"Ha! valiant Talmai!" exclaimed the Babylonian with boyish glee: "If thy eyes can be deceived my disguise is indeed safe. Dost recognise not thy friend, Nebuzaradan?"

"The prince it is," Talmai remarked with no affectation of surprise. "What is thy petition, noble Babylonian?"

"The goddess Mammitu, maker of fate, is busying herself with my affairs, my friend. No longer could I sit like a dove at her nest when the mighty voice of Nergal is lifted. Sickness entered into my stomach, O Nabathean, when I thought of thee charging thy foes—my foes—and I not there."

"But—thy command, thy duty?" asked Talmai in amazement.

"I endanger my head to the king. The risk is my own. No heavy force of Egyptians armed for war could cover a day's distance toward Ardiban without word reaching me, and I could return to Ardiban long

before Necho came within sight of it. For this chance have I provided. By my secretary Iba it is given out that the god of fever has taken possession of my body and that I am kept close in my room with a sorcerer and a physician. Iba uses my seal to sign documents which cannot be delayed until my return."

"It rejoices my heart to have thee with me. Thy reasons are thine own."

"Ah, and thou will rejoice the more after I reveal to thee my secret. Son of Mathan let not amazement overwhelm thee when I tell thee I possess the key to Nineveh."

Talmai jumped from his seat and rested his hands on the Babylonian's broad shoulders. "The lack of it," said he gravely, "kept slumber from my eyes this night."

"Ah! my news breaks down thy fortress of reserve. I thought it would be even so. Know thou, O Nabathean, that it is not with warriors, nor the weapons of war and combat, or with fire, or engines that discharge bolts or missiles, or with battering ram, or siege, or with famine, that Nineveh is to be taken, nor is my key of wood or bronze or any metal. Dost think there is a place for me in thy army?"

"Though for thy safety I tremble, great prince, gladly I welcome thee."

"Let me but be where the fighting is thickest, and the door of my mouth shall remain closed, nor do I care for position or title. Call me Akhi, the son of nobody. Hast thou selected a site for thy camp?"

"The northwestern corner of the city, in the neighbourhood of Tarbisi, is my choice. I shall ask the privilege of holding both banks of the river."

"The gods have guided thee aright. The Medes and their allies have fixed themselves on the eastern and northern sides of the city, while the Babylonians and their allies have erected their camps on the southern and western sides."

The cry of the sentries warned them of the lateness of the hour. Nebuzaradan, with an old campaigner's readiness, wrapped himself in a rug, refusing any better accommodation, and was soon buried in slumber. Believing that he saw light ahead on his undertaking, Talmai also slept.

Chapter XXXIX

THE RECONNAISSANCE OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR—CYAXARES THE MEDE

SURROUNDED by a glittering company of princes and noblemen, and preceded and followed by a mounted company of his guard, Nebuchadnezzar rode out of the gate of his new quarters near the southern gate of Nineveh one bright morning, bent on making a tour of inspection of the west side of the beleaguered city. It had pleased him to receive Omar into his favour, and that fortunate individual, as a special mark of distinction, rode beside him. Though the prince was not yet the partner of his father on the throne, he exercised regal authority in affairs pertaining to the conduct of the war, thus putting himself on an equality in the field with his Mede ally. The strict etiquette, however, which swathed a king of Babylon, Accad, and Sumer, did not benumb Nebuchadnezzar's court, and he permitted himself a certain nicely balanced freedom of action and speech.

The superbly accoutered guardsmen, splendid as they were in their uniform garb of white and blue, with burnished helmets and lance points flashing in the sun, and tasselled, plumed, and prancing horses, formed but a setting for the pageant of princes and great men who, in scarlet and purple and blue, in white, and gold, and violet, with sparkling chains about their necks and ribands fluttering from their mounts, gayly caracoled before and after the royal son of Nabopalassar.

The merchant was not misplaced in the company. The Egibi family was of princely rank, being of the banu, or descendants of the half-historical, half-mythological

heroes to whom the great families of Babylon traced their origin. He wore a garment of fine linen and purple, a robe of honour presented by the prince, and also the royal colours, blue and white.

Grave and thoughtful, speaking only at intervals, Nebuchadnezzar rode passively along on his Nissean mare, the golden trappings of which fairly coruscated in the sunlight. The cap he wore, tall, conical, yet light, was emblazoned with symbolical figures woven in golden threads and adorned with blazing gems. The upper rim bore erect a row of small ostrich tips held in place by a band of pearls, and the top was surmounted by an imperial sapphire. Underneath his purple cloak could be seen a cuirass covered with scales of gold. From a broad blue girdle there hung a gold-mounted sword, his tunic was white with golden threads in it, and his greaves and sandals were deep blue in colour.

The Tigris was low for the period of the year, but a sudden change in the weather from unusual coldness to unusual heat presaged a sudden rise in the waters. The party of reconnaissance was ferried across the stream by boatmen and landed at a point not far below the southwestern corner of the wall of the city. Their progress had not failed to attract the attention of the Ninevite guards, who from their lofty position eagerly eyed the movements of the Babylonians. On the western side of the river the Babylonians maintained entrenched camps, though, owing to the width of the river, attacks in force from the quarter rarely occurred. Between the Tigris and these walled camps was a wide, vacant space, and along this open ground the prince and his party proceeded leisurely, scanning the gigantic barrier opposite. The western face of the palace of Sennacherib, in which the Assyrian king dwelt, was part of the city wall, and the Tigris at this point was compressed to two hundred yards width. Where not interrupted by the richer architecture of the palace, blue gradines broke the evenness of the top of the wall, and there were towers at

regular distances, very richly coloured and very substantially made.

"Had I not supreme faith in the holy Oracle of Eridu, I would despair of breaking down yonder fence, son of Egibi," the prince remarked as his glance took in, detail by detail, the imposing front of stuccoed brick, with its polished stone base, its towers, and crenellations, and then passed upward to the superincumbent temple and palace whose glossy, variegated surfaces glowed effulgently in the morning light.

"A hard thing it is to do, my lord, how hard, no man knoweth more than thyself."

"Sennacherib and Assurbanipal each captured and spoiled Babylon within a season."

"Starvation conquered Babylon, prince, not deeds of arms. For two years Sargon assailed the city of Samaria before it fell, and the Greeks besieged Troy for ten years."

They were now in the suburb of Nineveh which lay on the western bank of the river. Being unwalled, its residents fled to Nineveh when the enemy closed in on the capital, and where once, amid exuberant vegetation, proud residences and lofty temples spoke of the luxury and wealth of a rich and aristocratic citizenship, there remained nothing save heaps and mounds. In the midst of charred and blackened hummocks Nebuchadnezzar stopped his horse and gazed contemplatively upward at the glowing palace across the river. They were so near that a flight of arrows would have compelled them to scatter, and soldiers on the towers idly observed them. It was too early in the day for the citizens who made the walls their lounging place to be abroad.

"Seest thou not, son of Egibi," remarked the prince, "that should the river overflow its banks its waters would rush to this side?"

"It is so, in truth, my lord," replied Omar.

"And if the Tigris broke its banks and went elsewhere the channel would be dry?"

"That also is true, my lord."

"It was Sennacherib, he who threw down the walls of Babylon, that built this wall. To lay a deep and solid foundation for this side of it he turned the Tigris into another channel, and while the foundation was being laid thou couldst have walked from here dry-shod to the foot of the wall."

"Thy father the king a mightier exploit accomplished, my lord, when he turned the Euphrates while he built the stone buttresses for the bridge at Babylon and repaired the quays."

Palace slaves were lowering and raising water by means of ropes and pulleys, the while lazily watching the Babylonians. Omar scanned the palace front closely. He could form a proximate idea of the location of the Long Gallery, and from there he traced by his mind's eye the course of the secret stairs down which he and Talmai and Itti-Bel were guided by the chief eunuch. In imagination he again ran down the Gallery behind Zirya, followed him through the secret door into the concealed passage, down the long gradient, where the horses used to go to water, and turned to the right. Closing his eyes, he saw before him the dim vault in which the mute and the boat waited for them. Then Omar opened his eyes and directed their gaze like a true shot from a bow upon the very spot in the wall which had opened to let them out. He was sure of it.

Would it be possible to rescue Sherah by that way?

Zirya said it would be closed, blocked. Perhaps it was, perhaps—

"Tell me, Omar, thou who art named the wise," said Nebuchadnezzar, and the merchant saw his piercing eyes bent upon him. "Tell me how we princes may force men to yield up the thoughts of their heart. Their bodies, to do with as we will, are ours, yet inside is a fortress no king can plunder of its secrets. As thou didst gaze upon yonder wall my god-companion inspired me to learn thy thoughts."

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness, great prince. I have an only child, a daughter, captive in the palace of Sin-sar-iskun."

Nebuchadnezzar was immediately interested and requested the merchant to tell him the circumstances connected with his daughter's captivity. This the merchant did as they went on, omitting, however, the manner of his own departure from the city, but speaking of her betrothal to the Nabathean.

"Where is the ground Prince Talmai asks for his Arameans?" asked the prince when he had concluded.

"Here in front of us, and on the other side, near the northwest angle, which, as thou knowest, is the strongest section of the defenses."

"I have consulted Cyaxares the king, and he is exceedingly willing to abandon it and concentrate on the east and northeast. This also is the angle which Prince Nebuzaradan chose for attack. Had he and Prince Talmai talk between themselves at Ardiban?"

"They had, my lord."

Nebuchadnezzar fell into one of his musing moods, and they continued to a safe distance above the angle, where boats and boatmen were waiting to ferry them to the eastern shore that they might inspect the northern side. As they floated across the river in the big, round boats which could carry three or four men and their horses, Nebuchadnezzar looked long and earnestly at the angle of the wall first lapped by the Tigris. To him, as to every beholder, it presented an aspect of overawing massiveness. Its huge bulk upreared itself above the Tigris to the height of one hundred feet and was capped by a great square tower. Its thickness equalled its height. Omar glanced at the prince's face. It was calm, inscrutable, imperturbable, the eyes fixed upon the pile of rubble and sun-dried brick in their casing of polished stone and creamy stucco.

On reaching the shore they saw men on horseback rapidly approaching who were soon recognised as Medes,

and the display of a royal standard indicated that king Cyaxares was one. The Babylonians, remounting their horses, galloped forward to meet their allies.

"Welcome to the camps of the Medes, Prince Nebuchadnezzar," said the king, with a frank smile.

"Peace unto the noble father of my Amytis," replied the prince. The Medes turned and rode on with the Babylonians. It could be seen that whatever differences there might be among the allies, the personal relations of the two leaders were amiable. They formed a striking contrast. Prince Nebuchadnezzar bore in face, manner, and movement the reposeful stamp of generations of noble ancestors. Cyaxares had also a kingly bearing, but his air indicated nervous energy, personal daring, an aggressive nature. The Medes as yet were not sufficiently removed from their nomad forefathers that a priest or a philosopher might rule over them; their king must be their leader in battle as well as council. As they had borrowed the system of army organisation and equipment of the Assyrians, so in their attire and social habits they had acquired all the luxuries of the superior civilisation of the Assyrians and Babylonians, and also those vices which are inseparable from an effete civilisation. They had been known to the Assyrians for 230 years, and Shalmanesar II, Shamas Rimmon II, Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Assurbanipal had successively and repeatedly ground them under foot. When Assurbanipal was nearing his end one of their city chiefs, Phraortes, the father of Cyaxares, gathered a great army and invaded Assyria. The old lion of Assur aroused himself and with one swift, terrible blow annihilated the Median army and killed Phraortes. Cyaxares reorganised his army after the manner of the Assyrians, adopting the Assyrian formation and tactics. Then, twenty years previous to the present siege, he laid siege to Nineveh. But the hour of the city of Assur had not arrived. While he was encamped before Nineveh the Skythians invaded his country, and he hurriedly marched back to its de-

fense. About the same time Nabopalassar seized the throne of Babylon. Cyaxares freed Media of the Scythians, Nabopalassar established himself firmly on his throne, and they formed the alliance which led to the existing war against Assyria.

"Time and chance favour thee, Prince," said the Mede. "Thou shalt see an attack on the northern gate. We have been waiting for an auspicious day, and this morning our magi declared the time propitious. By the might of Ormazd!" he broke out passionately, "I will not wait so patiently on these priests hereafter."

"Merodach and Sin, the light of heaven and earth, whose promises change not," responded Nebuchadnezzar, "have said the walls shall fall ere the nights and the days again are even." Then, changing the subject, he asked if his captains had been notified, that they might make simultaneous attacks on the south and west, and thereby keep the defenders engaged on those sides while the more elaborate assault was made by the Medes.

"They were notified, prince," replied Cyaxares, "and it was thus I learned of thy reconnaissance. Yonder is the gate selected for attack."

Though there was no advanced work to the northern gate projecting into the plain, the moat running along the wall furnished as efficient protection. The bridge which formerly spanned the moat was gone, and great flanking towers rose sheer above the deep, sluggish water. The leaves of the gate were cedar studded with bronze, and behind them was the long vaulted passage through the wall into the city.

"When do our forces set themselves in battle array, great king?" asked Nebuchadnezzar.

"At the midhour between sunrise and noon, and," glancing at the sun, "the time is nigh. Let us withdraw to the entrenched camps."

Chapter XL

THE COMBINED ASSAULT UPON NINEVEH

SOON the signal came, a series of loud, sharp trumpet notes, breaking in upon the peace of the morning like the cracks of a whip lash in the hand of Nergal. From camp to camp it reverberated, and almost simultaneously the entire circuit of the wall of Nineveh was fringed with faces peering over the serrated battlements at the swaying lines of Medes and Babylonians and their auxiliaries which had so suddenly appeared from behind the fortified camps and were advancing upon all sides of the beleaguered city. From Ninevite houses, guard rooms and barracks ran archers, slingers, javelin-throwers, and all those who were drilled in defensive tactics, buckling on their armour as they hurried to their appointed stations on the wall. Before the allies were ready to open the engagement there was a formidable force along the lofty parapet, ready to shoot arrow for arrow, and the weapons of the swiftly gathering spearmen and javelin-throwers scintillated like running sparks.

The first charge was made by the heavy-armed mailed archers, and they ran out of their walled camps on the four quarters and quickly formed into closed ranks two and three and four lines deep according to the strength or weakness of particular points to be assailed. Each bowman had a light-armed companion who carried a tall convex shield capable of protecting both men. In this order they marched in fair alignment across the wide stretch of beaten ground that separated the combatants.

The Ninevites jeered at sight of them.

It was no new experience, these futile onslaughts.

A few arrows flew from the battlements and towers, and

the bowmen increased their gait. The besieged watched the undulating lines of bucklers creeping nearer and nearer, as the flexible folds of a python enwrap its prey. They watched as spectators on the edge of a pit might have watched a conflict between a lion and a constrictor snake. For the moment the combat was almost an impersonal matter with the Ninevites. But suppose the lion or the python got among the spectators?

If any of the Ninevites had this anticipatory dread they did not manifest it. Mothers holding up their children encouraged them to make derisive motions and call down the curses of the gods on the invaders. They shrieked forth maledictions, and defiantly flourished their stout arms, and spat disdainfully into the defenceless air. It was a howling wind of vituperation preceding a storm of deadly weapons.

By this time the city was seething with excitement and turmoil. Dense smoke was pouring in suffocating clouds from chimneys where bitumen was being heated to the boiling pitch. There was other smoke also arising. The priests were busy.

The archers drew nearer.

The Ninevite men hooted and spat toward them, with gesticulation and taunt, while the women excelled them in expressions of contumely and frantic manifestations of contempt.

A sharp command passed down the ranks of the attackers.

Every shield-bearer dropped his shield to the ground, where it stood on end. A murmur was heard passing along the front of bronze, and then, with a confused medley of shuffling and the sharp click of metal against metal, the shields were brought together, edge to edge, when, lo! there was an unbroken breastwork of bucklers, behind which crouched archers and aids.

Another order, and the breastwork oscillated, heaved, and wriggled forward. The attackers were drawing in their folds.

On the walls and towers excitement grew, but the shrill clamour of the women and the voiced defiance of men did not interfere with the preparations for active and vigorous defence. Keen eyes noted the distance to the creeping lines. Sinewy fingers nervously twitched bow and shaft. An occasional arrow whizzed forth to test the range. Suddenly, up went the shields and forward they dashed, only to drop again and form anew the same impenetrable screen, yet closer to the wall.

A hoarse shout arose from the warriors on the battlements, and for a while the women were silent.

Once more the shields went up and again they dashed forward, to drop, as before, into long rows of serried bulwarks.

Then, on the battlements, bows sprang to breast, javelins flashed viciously to a poise, the resounding clap of balistæ was heard, and the air became dark with flying darts and volleys of arrows and stones. The fence of bronze and brawn quivered, as the trees of the forest quiver in the wind, and wavered; where the boulders struck the ranks they reeled and parted.

Then arose that ancient battle-cry of the Assyrians:

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

Fierce and wild, strong and savage, the old cry which had awakened nations and curdled the blood about men's hearts swept from battlement to battlement, and tower to tower, as the gaps in the screen evinced the deadly work of the projectiles.

The children on the walls screamed with delight, and the women, placing their hands to their throats, emitted the piercing ululations of victory.

But their joy was short-lived. The besiegers had not been taken by surprise. With answering battle cries they closed their ranks, and when the demonstration on the walls was loudest they discharged volley after volley of arrows into the shouting fringe of humanity above. Again and again the thousands of bowstrings twanged, one arrow following close upon the heels of another into

the rows of over-confident Ninevites. Shrieks of pain and terror succeeded the yells of exultation, and the infuriated amazons disappeared from the battlements. The battle was now for men.

Encouraged by the success of their volley, the besiegers shouted again their war-cries, and amid the confusion the light-armed archers and slingers, who had been waiting for the opportunity, rushed to the line of bucklers and poured in another harassing volley. This was instantly answered from the walls, and the light-armed bodies were forced to retire out of range, only to repeat these tactics at favourable intervals throughout the action, thus keeping the entire garrison in a constant tumult and rendering it difficult for any section to support or succour another.

When the dismay of those upon the southern wall was at its utmost, the Babylonian spearmen, burdened with long ladders and shields, emerged from the rear of an attacking force of light archers, and ran toward the outwork of the gate, which stretched from the main wall across the moat as a covered bridge, and spread out upon the open plain in the form of an enclosed square. The portal was flanked by towers rising to a considerable height, and the captain of the Babylonians, a little, lean man named Zaidu, had perceived that these towers were insufficiently guarded. He accordingly ordered an immediate attack upon them, and when a spearman rushing by him was hit by an arrow from the wall, and dropped the ladder he was carrying, the captain caught it up.

"The towers!" he commanded, in a tremendous voice, plunging forward with the burden.

"The towers!" his captains of hundreds repeated, imitating his example.

Men fell at every step, but others seized their ladders and continued across the open space to the weak point.

"To the rescue, sons of Assur!" the cry went up from the outwork.

"To the rescue!" came the response from the upper wall.

"For Bel and the king!" roared the Babylonian captain, planting his ladder against the tower.

"Assur and Istar!" responded the Ninevites, discharging arrows, stones and javelins. The Babylonians held their shields above their heads, but the shower from above was destructive.

While this struggle was in progress, out of the low door in the main wall which opened upon the top of the advanced work, there poured armed Ninevites like bees out of a hive.

It was well for their comrades that they came. The captain narrowly escaped the missiles hurled at him, and would have been killed had not his shield-bearer protected him.

With long grappling irons the Ninevites fended off the ladders, and, as men and ladders toppled over, the warriors were exposed to a rain of arrows.

"Up, sons of Bel!" shouted the captain, in his great voice, as he struck with his mace at the grappling irons. Other officers covered by their shield-bearers mounted the ladders and sent forth ringing words of encouragement.

The Ninevites struggled desperately. Unless they held their position until sufficient reinforcement arrived, the outwork would be carried. In their desperation they recklessly became targets for the Babylonian archers, who had crept to within a hundred steps of the towers. The assaulters were in turn raked by cross volleys from the main wall.

Under his shield the captain crawled up the ladder, dropped the mace, and drew his sword. The grappling hook swinging overhead clutched at the ladder. It missed, and an impatient hand lowered it further for another swing. There was a yell of pain and a severed hand dropped to the ground; but the grappling hook passed to another and more successful grasp. A cry of terror arose from Zaidu's men as the ladder pitched outward,

Over it toppled, and the captain, his shield-bearer, and the others fell in a heap upon the ground. Instantly a dozen shields covered Zaidu. He sprang up nimbly.

"For Bel and the King!" thundered he. "Father Bel will not desert us, O Babylonians, he will come to our altars!"

"Father Bel! Father Bel!" they answered him, and he renewed the attack.

Babylonian miners and sappers had now succeeded in propping mantelets against the sides of the outwork and went at the polished limestone with pick and axe, but huge boulders lifted to the parapet and tumbled over would occasionally drop upon a mantelet, crushing it in and mangling the sappers beneath. The wielders of the stone, however, rarely escaped the aim of the Babylonian archers.

The top of the outwork was now full of defenders, and Zaidu, realising that the assault must be strengthened, withdrew somewhat to oversee and direct, instead of lead. He gave an order, and men with flaming arrows concealed behind their shields cautiously approached the gate of the outwork until near enough to shoot these cumbersome and dreaded bolts into the studded wood. The success of this archery was hailed with joyous shouts from the besiegers, while the besieged were almost thrown into a panic. Discipline, however, was paramount, and in a remarkably short space of time buckets of water were lowered on ropes and doused against the blazing tow. Again and again the arrows stuck in the wood, and again blazes were extinguished.

Zaidu ran back and forth, encouraging his men.

"Stand up! Stand up!" he cried to the shield bearers.

"Nothing shall stop ye!" he yelled to the sappers.

"Turn not thy face away!" he called to the archers.

"Come, O come, Nergal, with thy mighty weapon!" he invoked among the fire-archers. His stentorious voice dominated the field, and everywhere his officers were heard repeating his words.

Having his archers, spearmen, fire-archers, miners and sappers in action, Zaidu brought up some of the siege machines. First came balistæ and catapults for throwing heavy darts and ponderous rocks. Few of the bulky missiles cast by these machines did material damage, but where they struck the exposed masonry, parapet and gradine flew into fragments. They were employed with discretion, however, and principally in the lulls of the conflict, through fear of injury to friend as well as foe. It added terror to the conflict, if nothing more. The combat was in the heat of intensity when a small cloud of smoke arose above the battlements of the outwork, a cloud that swelled into a heavy nimbus and loaded the air with the stench of burning oil and bitumen. A shade of anxiety dispelled the look of ferocity in the Babylonian captain's eyes.

"Bring up the battering rams," he commanded, and an officer hurried away to do his bidding.

He noted the conduct of his men when they caught sight of the black smoke rolling heavenward. Many at once deserted the ladders, while those who were endeavouring to set fire to the portal, or were vainly pecking at the wall, began to sneak away.

"Cowards!" the officers screamed, beating them back into their places with whips terminating in metal balls.

"Wilt take your beating now or when the women meet ye!"

"To the walls! Back, men of Kardunyas, back to the walls!"

The Ninevites shouted and laughed with derision, they bawled out opprobrious epithets. The Babylonians returned to the charge, yet, when pots and buckets of boiling oil and bitumen were emptied upon them, their officers, at a word from Zaidu, permitted them to withdraw.

The Ninevites sounded their war cry, they clashed spear and shield. The archers fell back slowly, using their weapons with effect upon the compact mass above

them. The gallant attempt, however, was not to be abandoned. The retreating Babylonians rushed back to where the battering rams had been held in reserve and, seizing two of these formidable engines of war, pushed and pulled them forward on their wheels into the arena of battle. The Ninevites first raised a roar of laughter at the new effort of the enemy, but laughter was soon silenced by the proximity of the rams.

Tall as the outwork itself, the great lumbering structures which encased the battering rams and carried the men and machinery to operate these redoubtable siege weapons lurched forward like some enormous, menacing animal filled with a fiendish purpose. Tall, movable towers were they, composed of stout timber covered by wetted rawhide, containing loop-holes for the archers hidden in the upper and lower stories. The ram projected from the middle story and there was an additional curtain of rawhide attached to its pole for the better protection of the men who manipulated it.

The Ninevites lighed torches of tow and other inflamable substances and waited.

On the towers came, creaking and groaning, swaying and jolting. Except for the commands and exhortations of Zaidu, there was silence in the armies—silence and watchfulness.

Suddenly the tone of Zaidu's voice changed, and in response the Babylonian archers moved out in admirable order, and the maneuvers that opened the day's engagement were repeated. The object was to distract attention from the rams and divide the besieged. The Ninevites, however, were wary. They wasted fewer arrows and kept their eyes on the approaching artillery.

The machines rolled laboriously forward. Arrows began to drop around them, here, there, like the big drops of rain before the storm. Zaidu's lusty orders could be heard all down the line.

The arrows increased in number, and presently a volley was discharged. The darts fell short, went wide, rattled

harmlessly against the casing, but a few penetrated the insterstices, for wounded men dropped out, and dead men were cast out. With cheers for Bel and the king, their places were taken by others from the ranks behind, at imminent risk from the archers high above on the main wall.

On came the bulky machines, and soon the air was full of blazing torches which struck the fronts and sides, doing no injury there, but dropping under and by the side of the woodwork, where they still blazed. Inside the machines were immense water jars from which ran leather pipes. Wherever a torch flamed these pipes were directed.

The archers in the moving towers were by no means idle while this strenuous struggle between fire and water was in progress. From their elevated position they had clear scope for the exercise of their aim, and their execution told. With a roar of delight the Babylonians saw one of the machines attain striking distance of the outwork. They saw the ram sway, and they saw those above lower a chain by its two ends so that it formed a loop. The ram plunged forward but before it struck the wall the chain was jerked upward and in its ascent it jerked the ram upward too. Yet the metal head struck the wall with enough force to knock a hole in it.

"A golden chain for thee, O Istak," cried Zaidu, knowing whose skillful hand had dealt the blow.

The Babylonians gave vent to their feelings by another deep roar. Shouting, "Istar!" and, "The booty of Istar!" their spearmen, bearing ladders and shields, ran forward for a renewed attack, and the archers on foot moved nearer.

To offset the maneuver of the lowered chain two Babylonians came out from the battering ram and stationed themselves between the machine and the wall where they were partly sheltered by the saliencies. When the chain again descended they caught it on long hooked poles and held it down by sheer weight, so that the second time the

ram swung forward it was not caught up by the chain, but hit the wall with full momentum. The Babylonians nearly shrieked themselves hoarse. The Ninevites were correspondingly depressed. When the second ram got into position they probably would have deserted the advanced work and retreated to the city wall, had not another turn in the tide of battle occurred.

The supply of water inside the machines had now given out, and, notwithstanding the heroic attempts of the crews to avert the inevitable, first the framework of one, then of the other battering ram caught fire. The archers in the towers barely escaped cremation by hasty descent, and half of them were killed before they got beyond the range of the Ninevite bowmen.

Zaidu folded his arms and watched the big engines burn. It was not the first time he had been beaten back from this gate. He raised his clenched fist and shook it at the wildly jubilating Ninevites.

"Accursed city!" cried he. "Howl, cry, rejoice! Thou shalt be laid waste."

Chapter XLI

ATTACK UPON THE NORTHERN GATE—ARRIVAL OF THE ARAMEANS

WHILE the Babylonians on the south were fiercely assaulting the outwork, and their allies and brothers on the east and west were fighting the Ninevites at long range with arrows, javelin, and sling, a select corps of the Medes made a determined effort to storm Nineveh through the northern gate. The conditions on the four sides were different. On the west the Tigris separated the combatants, and on the east there was the thickness of nearly half a mile in walls, demilunes, and moats, the latter fed by the Khosr river. On the south there was a moat, but the advanced work bridging it was a tactile target; on the north there was no projecting gatework or other salient point for attack, and a deep wide moat prevented near approach to the gate.

The water in the moat came from the Khosr, which flowed to the wall of Nineveh from the east. By damming and dividing the stream, part of it flowed south and thence west, passing by the southern gate under the advanced work, and emptying into the Tigris at the southwest angle of the city wall. The other half flowed north and thence west, passing by the northern gate, and emptying into the Tigris at the northwest angle of the city wall. There was a dam in the moat at the northwest angle over which the water flowed in a lazy waterfall. The dam also guarded the northern wall from the Tigris when it was turbulent.

When Nebuchadnezzar and his party gained the entrenched camps near the northern gate they beheld with surprise and chagrin the preparations of the Medes for

a sustained, vigorous attack. Cyaxares had accumulated an immense quantity of rocks and stones, tree trunks and limbs, and thousands of sacks of earth, with which material it was proposed to fill the moat in front of the gate. There were also several battering rams, and a full supply of tow torches and arrows with inflammable stuff attached. The force at hand, composed of all branches of the service except cavalry, was very heavy.

Cyaxares smiled with grim satisfaction as he viewed the preparations.

"What thinkst thou, noble Nebuchadnezzar? Shall we not force the Assyrian like a fox from his hole?"

"Had I the broad ears and the seeing eyes of Nebo and Tasmit, Cyaxares, I might answer thee."

The soldiers in the entrenched camps were assembling for formation into companies and regiments. White-robed priests marched in procession to the fire altars or stood around them and performed magical incantations. Sacrifices for the success of the army had been offered, and some of the priests were singing hymns, waving bunches of twigs in unison with the music. Nebuchadnezzar and his officers scanned the Medes narrowly as they swung into line, and the Medes, observing the Babylonians, went through the preliminary evolutions with particular care.

Cyaxares and his chiefs rode swiftly from one entrenchment to the other, the king briefly addressed his men.

"The magi declare we are to win a great victory, soldiers," said he. "The enemy is before us, and Ormazd is fighting with us. It may be that many will cross the bridge of the gatherer, but the happy Serosh will meet and guide us over."

Upon the signal for the attack being given, the first to advance were bowmen with their shield-bearers, and throughout the engagement archers and slingers maintained an incessant discharge upon the defenders. Many a projectile struck a weak place in the armour of a Nine-

vite or flew with fatal effect into an exposed eye or cheek. The men on the wall responded with arrows and javelins. Uttering their wild mountain cries, and sounding their horns and trumpets, the Medes fought bravely and with savage energy. From a convenient point Nebuchadnezzar and his men inspected them and were joined by Cyaxares when the king was not personally directing some new movement.

After several hours of this warfare, Nebuchadnezzar called Rimut the captain of the guard to his side.

"What of their venture, Rimut?" he asked.

"Their strength is spent in vain," answered the soldier. "By force of arms will those walls never be broken down. I have seen the inside."

"And thou, Omar? What thinkst thou?"

"They might be carried by craft, my lord; never by force."

"Yet if I should ask Musallin there, or the son of Nidintum, the answer would be that nothing could prevail against the terror of my majesty. Art thou less loyal than they, Rimut?"

The captain was visibly embarrassed; yet he knew the prince. "I am the dust under thy feet, my lord. Mayst thou live eternally."

"See!" said Omar. "Yon is a rash undertaking."

"Albeit a bold one," commented Nebuchadnezzar.

The Medes were carrying stones by the thousands to the moat.

"Miserably will they be cut down. No, they have shield-bearers!"

"They pour out of every camp, my lord," said Rimut excitedly. "There must be ten thousand running to the moat."

"The king rides forward in his chariot. He points to where the stones are to be thrown. An arrow has struck one of his horses! But he goes forward on foot," continued the prince. "Can the Medes withstand the fury of the arrows? Ah! they press forward, though the

ground is covered with their prostrate comrades. They hurl their loads into the moat. But see, Omar, is not the king hit? Yes, he has fallen. Forward, Musallin, and ascertain if the noble Cyaxares is dangerously hurt."

The young nobleman urged his horse to speed. He found Cyaxares scant of breath but uninjured.

"Tell thy prince, son of Arrabi," he said, "that Cyaxares will not be absent when the day of reckoning with Nineveh comes."

He had been knocked down by a javelin which did not penetrate his armour.

The loss of the Medes was serious, and they would have withdrawn but for the presence of the little knot of Babylonians. The Ninevites did not depend alone on arrows and javelins, but hurled huge boulders upon the converging warriors. A metal helmet was slight protection when a stone fell upon it from such a height. Through the mass of archers and dead and unconscious soldiers, Cyaxares and his generals urged detachment after detachment of stone bearers. If the moat were filled with stones they would cross and directly beset the gate.

The unequal contest continued notwithstanding the fearful rain of missiles, and the invisible pile beneath the water in the moat grew higher and higher. Had it continued an hour longer more than half the Medes would have been rendered helpless. Two of his chiefs made their way to Cyaxares and urged him to order a recall. He refused at first, but, fearing the demoralisation of his men, reluctantly consented, and the Medes drew off, carrying their dead and wounded.

The Assyrians beheld the retreat with the liveliest emotions, and their shouts made the hurt of the wounded deeper and the chagrin of the able the more galling.

Nebuchadnezzar and his company rode up to where the king stood in a circle of his chiefs, glowering and dispirited.

"A gallant fight, O king!" exclaimed the Babylonian,

with such truthful admiration that the scowls on the faces of the Medes disappeared.

" It adds to Nineveh's debt, prince," replied the king.

Nebuchadnezzar dismounted and lavished praise upon the chiefs individually and collectively. His consideration and the manner of its expression did much to lessen the sting of defeat. Even while he was talking, a messenger from the southern gate arrived with information that the Babylonian general had deemed it advisable to abandon the attack there. This he communicated to the Medes, which served to comfort them.

The Babylonians bade the Medes farewell and soon re-crossed the Tigris. They rode along the broad open space fronting the western wall, on which could be seen the evidences of the archery duel between the Babylonians and the Assyrians. The battlement and the palace platforms were alive with exultant Ninevites, who knew by this time that the assault from every quarter had been repulsed. Women and children were again strongly in evidence, and among those who thronged the parapet of the palace of the king Omar thought he distinguished Istar-bela. His thoughts flew to Sherah, whom he believed to be a captive of the old priest, and he wondered if the king's favourite and the chief eunuch had given up the search for her.

The party was repeatedly shot at from the wall, but the arrows fell short. The missiles were intended more as insults than with any expectation of doing bodily harm. Depressed in spirit, the prince spoke little. He watched the army hangers-on scouring the plain for arrows and other war spoil, and heard them grumbling at the poorness of the picking. It was not the first time he had heard grumbling. His revery was broken by a messenger who dismounted and stood to be heard.

" Speak," commanded Nebuchadnezzar.

" May my lord give ear to me," began the messenger. " Prince Talmai of the Arameans has arrived at the out-

skirts of the camp and craves permission to take thy feet."

"It is thy Nabathean, son of Egibi," said Nebuchadnezzar. Then to the messenger, "Bid him come hither."

The Babylonian rode on, expecting his new ally to meet them before they reached the point where they must cross the river south of Nineveh. Omar was so manifestly anxious that Nebuchadnezzar noticed it. "Have no fear, Omar. Thy friend is my friend," said the prince.

Soon they saw the Nabathean with a small party coming rapidly toward them. Omar discerned Itti-Bel, the two Pekod princes, and several Aramean chiefs. Talmai was clothed as becomes a prince, and the men with him were also magnificently attired. Watching the face of the Babylonian, Omar observed a curious expression creep into Nebuchadnezzar's eyes.

"Tell me, son of Egibi," said he, halting his horse, "who is the man in front?"

"It is the prince, Talmai, my lord."

Nebuchadnezzar gazed at the merchant intently. "When praising the Nabathean, thou didst not inform me that I had met him."

The glance confused Omar, who thought there was also reproach in the tone. "No, my lord," he answered. "The prince wished to remain unknown until, as leader of the Nabatheans, he could honour thee with something more than lip service."

Nebuchadnezzar turned his horse in the direction of the comers and went forward. On his approach Talmai dismounted, but not sooner than the Babylonian. The two advanced quickly, and Nebuchadnezzar by a gesture forbade the customary prostration. On the contrary, he embraced Talmai in the presence of both parties. The Arameans were flattered and gratified.

"Welcome, son of Mathan," said the Babylonian so that all could hear. "Welcome, my brother."

"I thank thee, great prince," replied Talmai. "I

thank thee for thy welcome, and for the privilege of serving thee. May my brother grant me friendship."

"Friends," said Nebuchadnezzar, turning to the Babylonians, "know and tell all that Talmai of the Nabatheans must be esteemed as myself."

A murmur of surprise arose from the prince's attendants, who, following his example, had dismounted. Musallin, as a relative of the prince, spoke for the others.

"We are his slaves, my lord."

"Forget not Calah, my lord, and what thou didst for me there," said Talmai.

"No, Nabathean, it clings to my memory. Even this lad here I remember."

Itti-Bel, thus directly alluded to, shrank back behind the Pekods. Nebuchadnezzar, recalling the interest his princess took in the lad, beckoned him forward.

"Thy face speaks well for thee," he said. "But no Aramean art thou."

"An Ionian, my lord," Omar explained.

"Thy friends, Talmai, are my friends," continued the Babylonian, whereupon the merchant presented the Pekods and the other Arameans.

"Speak thy wish, brother," he said to Talmai.

"It is, to be permitted to go at once into camp at the place designated, my lord."

"Let the order issue," the Babylonian commanded his scribe. "And now, my brother, go thy way. Through my trusted servant Omar I will let thee know my wishes. Farewell."

Nebuchadnezzar remounted his horse and, followed by his suite, rode on toward the river, while Talmai and his friends rejoined their men and that night slept in their new camp.

Chapter XLII

THE TUNNEL UNDER THE WALL OF NINEVEH

"HERE pitch thy tent," said the disguised Babylonian to Talmai, at a certain point on the Tigris immediately above the northwest angle of the wall of Nineveh. Nebuzaradan's advice ruled, and the tent, a wide-spreading, billowy affair of goatskin, covering several hundred feet, was erected on the edge of the bluff overlooking the bed of the river. Part of it, in fact, extended over the edge and formed an annex on a narrow bench of land lying between the bluff and the water. Heavy carpets and screens of reeds with woven devices divided the interior of the tent into numerous compartments. By the liberality of Omar all were supplied with the richest furnishings, gold and silver ornaments, the finest of carpets and hangings, and ebony and cedar inlaid couches and chairs. The smaller tents of the Nabatheans were ranged in a crescent about it. The Gambalians, Pekods, and other tribes occupied the entrenched camps deserted by the Medes, while the Sukhi held the west bank of the river. Talmai set men to work making brick.

On the first night of their stay in camp Talmai, Nebuzaradan, Urman, the Pekod princes, and the Nabathean leaders were gathered in the annex of the tent, the walls of which were heavily draped, a precaution taken to insure privacy. Nebuzaradan had his head enveloped in a burnous.

"Prince," said he, "may I speak boldly?"

"Speak as thou oughtst to speak."

Nebuzaradan looked at the circle of eager faces. "I told thee, son of Mathan, that I possessed the key to

Nineveh. If it is an idle boast, ye all shall judge, and judging, punish."

"There was no talk of punishment, Hagarene," interposed Urman.

Nebuzaradan measured the bulky Gambalian with a glance.

"No, but punishment oft comes uninvited. Know then that among those who laid siege to Nineveh last year were some who believed that by undermining the northwest angle of the city wall, the vengeance of the gods could be hastened. The intent was to run a tunnel along the bank of the river until it reached the northwest foundation, where the river first strikes the wall. There a chamber was to be dug out, leaving a shell of earth between it and the bed of the river. They reasoned that if the Tigris rose to a great height the weight of the water would break this shell, whereupon the wall would fall, and they being in readiness would rush into the city. They began the tunnel, and it was nearing the city wall when for some unrevealed cause it was abandoned. Of the men who started that mine I alone am here."

The faces of the Aramean chiefs expressed doubt, incredulity. There was a restless movement among them as of impatience.

Talmai lifted his hand for silence.

"Hear me, ye doubters, and I will convince," Nebuzaradan went on, undisturbed. "Since leaving here I have pondered this project in my heart. What if the river did not break the shell? What if the wall did not fall? Considering these uncertainties, I determined it would be safer to continue and tunnel into the city rather than depend on the river. That tunnel," concluded Nebuzaradan impressively, "can be tapped from where we stand."

The chiefs gazed dumbly at him, in astonishment.

"Much remains to be done—"

"We will supply the labour," interrupted Urman eagerly. "Do thou show the way."

Talmai gave an order, and one of his chiefs left the tent, returning shortly with ten Nabatheans carrying picks, shovels, and light wicker baskets. The Babylonian stepped to the face of the bluff on top of which was the main tent and touched the earth with his sword.

"Dig here," he commanded, in a tone of confident exultation.

The men went at their work with the eagerness of curiosity, and as fast as one set dug out soil another set filled the baskets and dumped the contents over the side of the shelf into the swift waters of the river. Within two hours they had penetrated twelve feet into the ground, slanting downward as they progressed, and by midnight the distance was nearly doubled. The chiefs watched operations with tense interest.

Some time after midnight one of the picks struck a solid obstacle, and the Babylonian who had been waiting for the sound, descended into the excavation and, scraping away the dirt, held a light to a spot indicated by his finger.

"Behold, son of Mathan," said he.

Talmai went to his side and, upon scrutinising the spot, saw brickwork.

"The outer wall of the tunnel," explained Nebuzaradan. "It was begun higher up the river because of the sorties of the Assyrians, and when abandoned the mouth was closed. But the Assyrians make no more sorties, and thou, Prince of Good Fortune, mayst finish it without peril."

The other Arameans examined the bricks and expressed their delight in murmurs of congratulation. The diggers vigorously attacked the wall but as the bricks had been laid when soft and wet and had subsequently hardened into a solid mass, the labour of cutting through was prolonged until nearly daybreak. This, at last accomplished, the tunnel as revealed proved to be a wide vaulted passage laid on the same lines as the great drains of Nineveh and Babylon, and so well constructed that no dampness

had penetrated from the exterior. With torches the Arameans explored the tunnel to the end nearest the city wall, approaching which the trend dipped heavily. By step measurement they calculated that it extended almost to the moat, beneath which, if continued, it would pass.

"In places we had to dig through rock," said Nebuzaradan. "We may have to do so again here."

The Arameans cast curious glances at this mysterious stranger, who noted their elation with corresponding self-complacency and smiled.

"Speed is demanded," he said, "and absolute secrecy. Men can work here day and night, and the earth be thrown into the river in the darkness. Only beneath the moat will bricks be needful, and they can be brought in at night. Son of Mathan, I ask that these chiefs and princes take an oath of secrecy."

"We will," they all murmured earnestly. He insisted that each make to him a personal vow, which they did. Arrangements were then perfected for relays of soldiers to continue the mine under the Babylonian's supervision, and all the Arameans departed except Talmai.

"And now, prince," he began, but Nebuzaradan stopped him.

"Akhi, son of nobody, am I."

"So be it. I beg thee to share my tent above and not bury thyself here."

"It cannot be, Talmai. Here I remain. Luxury I love and enjoy in my palaces. Here am I a soldier. The sun shall not again shine upon my face until after I enter Nineveh through this mine. He that begun it shall finish it. Even willing am I that Prince Nebuchadnezzar shall have the glory of it. And—" Nebuzaradan now spoke with passionate energy—"though my life pay the penalty, back to Ardiban I cannot go without completing it. Unless," he added after a pause, "Pharaoh Necho advances upon Ardiban."

"It shall be as thou dost direct. Itti-Bel shall see to it that thy orders are executed."

Talmai took his leave and ascended to the tent above. Nebuzaradan was seen no more outside of the tent while the siege lasted.

The unusual cold weather continued for a fortnight or more after operations on the mine began, and the snow-banks on the high mountains north and northeast of Assyria remained intact. The cities of the lowlands, like Upe and Bagdadu, made preparations for the high waters which they knew from experience to be inevitable. The canals were thoroughly cleaned, and their banks reinforced. In all the lands of the two rivers there was anticipation of dangerous floods.

For Talmai, as general of the 12,000 Arameans gathered at Nineveh, there was much to do, yet each evening after darkness set in he and the black mute floated in a boat down the swelling Tigris and landed opposite the palace mound, where the slave sent a horrible hail quavering across the water. Night after night they listened for the answering signal. This, Talmai learned from his companion's gesticulations, was to be a torch, waved swiftly in a circle. Again and again the mute would distend his knotty throat and utter his gruesome, curdling cry, but no waving torch lit up the darkness of the huge lowering mass, which at that hour seemed doubly deserted of man and fate. His unsuccessful attempts to communicate with Istar-bela or Zirya, and their failure or neglect to communicate with himself or the merchant added to Talmai's uneasiness. The situation was becoming acute. The silence of the priest of Eridu, who, if he held Sherah for ransom, should have been negotiating for her return, was ominous. If a priest of Bel had abducted her, might she not have been tortured to wring from her what she knew of the missing Amulet? He resolved, if it was possible, to make an attempt to rescue Sherah before the Arameans entered the city through the mine. This attempt would depend upon the locality where the tunnellers broke through on the city side of the wall. If the existence of the mine could be

concealed from the Ninevites for any length of time after it was completed, he might be able to gain the palace through the subterranean passage leading from Omar's residence and return to his own tent before the soldiers invaded the city. Numerous plans were discussed by Talmai and Omar, but none brought relief to their wrought-up feelings. Omar gave Talmai a seal ring to be shown to the keeper of the merchant's house in Nineveh, should occasion require its use.

To obtain Nebuzaradan's consent to possible delay was no easy task. The Babylonian could not sympathise with the sentiment of the motive, but grudgingly agreed, with the proviso that no risk to the success of his undertaking be incurred.

"Thou canst have thy pick of the women of Nineveh," he argued. "Why endanger our undertaking for one? Not a drop in the clepsydra should go unaccounted for from now on. Good success is surely ours. We who first enter the city must at once attack the northern gate from the inside. It may or may not be easily broken down, but while the enemy is defending it our warriors can press into the city through the mine. However, if thy wish can be accomplished, so be it, and here is my hand upon it."

"I thank thee, Nebuzaradan. Another thing. My men, by stealth, at night, have measured the water that covers the heaped up stones cast by the Medes into the moat."

"Thou hast done well!"

"It is barely waist high, and with ladders we could mount from the moat into the entry before the gate."

"Ye shall, and soon. My work is nearly finished."

The weather had suddenly grown warm and for three days the sun had set and risen blood red. The erratic flight of crows, the loud rasping of locusts, the restlessness of animals, and the shifting of the wind from the north to the south forecast sharp climatic changes. So fierce was the sun's heat that it shrivelled tender vegeta-

tion and changed the colour of the native grass and volunteer grain from the fresh green of spring to a sickly yellow, and later to the dingy brown of sapless fibers. At intervals the wind would suddenly shift to the northwest, and a fierce storm with thunder and lightning drench the earth, followed by a few hot, clear days and more storms.

Talmai, descending into the tent annex one day, met Nebuzaradan coming forth from the mine, begrimed with dirt and perspiration. It was a strange spectacle, this powerful lord delving like a common labourer for no other reward than a barren glow of success.

"Forgive me, Prince Talmai," said Nebuzaradan with a pleased smile, "I have deceived thee."

"Thy face tells me there is no evil in thy heart," Talmai replied.

"Nor is there. I deceived thee in the distance we had to delve. Within the hour thy soldiers have started an upraise inside of the wall."

This was said in a triumphant tone, the tone of gratified pride. Though not unexpected, it surprised Talmai, as he began to realise how near they were to the consummation of a great enterprise.

"A year's income would I give to know exactly the spot where we will break through into the city," continued Nebuzaradan. "Upon it depends much. Canst thou not plant wings in that black imp who follows thee around like a dog?"

Talmai laughed. "I have confidence in bravery and skill, Babylonian. When may we expect to reach the surface?"

"Naught remains to be done save to line the upraise with brick. Before another sunset we should be in Nineveh."

"And what part in the attack dost thou wish to take?"

"When we talked together at Tabite there was a covenant established between us. I put myself under thy yoke. Thou art the commander, I the soldier."

"Then select thy place, Prince."

"The charge of the assault upon the gate from the interior would please me well. There will be the first fighting. Give me the watchword, and with my sword will I leave my mark on Nineveh."

"I ask thee to have charge of my Nabatheans. Urman the Gambalian shall be my second in command, I have regard for thy future in this. Doth the arrangement please thee?"

"What thou sayest will I do. Only order thy Nabatheans to be first in the attack."

"As thou wishest. To-morrow will we decide upon the distribution of troops inside the walls."

The two parted, and Talmai hastened to the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, where he informed Omar of the nearness of the culmination of their plans. Notwithstanding his habit of calm thought, the merchant had become thin with anxiety for his new-found daughter, and his hand shook as he gave the Nabathean a parting blessing. "If all goes as we hope," he said, "thou shalt eat bread with Nebuchadnezzar and his court at my house in Nineveh. The prince has promised to be my guest when we capture the city."

The next day Talmai and those in the secret of the mine had a conference. If the circumstances permitted he was to have twenty-four hours in Nineveh in which to find Sherah before the soldiers were turned loose upon the city. If they were discovered upon breaking into the city from the mine there was to be a simultaneous attack upon the northern gate from the inside and the outside. The Arameans decided to risk the attack alone, depending on the darkness of night and the confusion to aid them. The longer their allies remained out, the more booty could be amassed. Before their numerical weakness could be discovered the Medes and Babylonians would reinforce them.

Upon leaving the council Talmai's attention was drawn to the great height of the Tigris, which had already passed

the high-water mark and was nearly half way up to the bench from which they were conducting their burrowing. There was no expectation that it would rise to the bench, yet, Talmai thought, it must once have done so as the bench itself evidently had been formed by some great flood of the past. He ordered all the tents that were exposed to danger to be removed to the plain above, except a sufficient number for the guards.

Chapter XLIII

THE ARAMEANS GAIN ENTRANCE TO THE CITY

NEBUZARADAN sent for augurs and consulted long and seriously. Near sunset he chanced to walk to the edge of the tent where it overhung the river, and, lifting the flap, he glanced over the swollen Tigris. What he saw startled him. The waters had crept up more than half the distance between where he stood and its level of the evening previous. The Sukhi on the opposite side had become fearful of the embankment where the waters once before had been diverted, and were removing tents that might be caught in the mad whirl should the levee give way.

This new factor in their calculation disturbed Nebuzaradan, and he sent for Talmai. As they conversed, an Aramean officer came and informed Talmai that the Tigris had risen above the level of the dam across the moat at the northwest angle, and that, instead of the waters of the moat flowing into the Tigris, the waters of the Tigris were flowing into the moat.

Talmai looked questioningly at the Babylonian after the officer retired.

"The prophecy of the Ninevan oracle nears fulfilment," said Nebuzaradan. "'None shall take Nineveh by force until the river itself declares war upon the city.'"

"If the moat breaks in upon our tunnel our labour comes to naught."

"Fear not for the tunnel, Prince. It could hold up the Tigris; but if the waters should rise to where we stand and flow into the tunnel, then indeed would our labour be set at naught. And by Rimmon the Inundater! we shall forestall that ending to our devices. To work! To work!"

To such purpose did Nebuzaradan speak that within an hour he and Talmai stood at the end of the mine, with but a crust of earth between them and the inside of Nineveh. In anticipation of the completion of their task, and of riving the only barrier that lay before them, Talmai had notified the Aramean chiefs to have their warriors in readiness for instant service. The workers had retired, and the two princes were alone. In a comparatively short time they would achieve the greatest victory known to men, or be utterly crushed and annihilated.

Nebuzaradan gently rubbed his finger-tips over the brick lining. He held his torch close to the wall, which was here curved upward crescent-wise, and scrutinised the workmanship.

"This is my mine," said he. "For it I have risked life and honour. But 'tis not treasure that can be stored in palaces," he added resignedly. "Summon thy men, Prince of Good Fortune." He courteously motioned Talmai to precede him and they went forth.

The chiefs were called together, and the prearranged line of action was taken up with silent activity. Two hours after sunset the leaders said all was in readiness. Talmai, Nebuzaradan, Urman, Bani-ya, Banu-sin, and a few others, as the leaders of the movement, took position beneath the crust of earth which separated them from the city. Back of them, extending down the vaulted mine and beyond into the tent, were princes and chiefs of the Arameans and their chosen men. Outside, all the Arameans were under arms in their camps, waiting the order to move, none knew where. It was an interval of keen, though repressed, excitement. Those in the secret felt the greatest anxiety about the spot which would mark their invasion of Nineveh. Would it be exposed to immediate attack, or would it afford sufficient concealment for a large force to enter ere their presence was discovered? Would it give Talmai the twenty-four hours he asked in which to find Sherah?

The second hour of the first watch was the time set by Nebuzaradan, in accordance with the revelations of the augurs.

He and Talmai reserved for themselves the honour of putting the finishing strokes to the enterprise. Silently they began to pick away at the barrier above them. As the earth fell those next to them pushed it along the bottom with their feet and thus was it scattered.

Softly and more softly the clods pattered down, and carefully and more carefully the picks played. The men shuffling the clay away barely touched it with their feet, so fearful were they that the noise would awaken the city. Toward the last they caught the pieces of earth in their cloaks and passed them down the line by hand. Speech was forbidden.

It was Nebuzaradan's pick that first went through into the open. The cold current of night had not fanned the men below ere his head was thrust through the aperture. Then he dropped back down the incline and whispered to Talmai:

"There is a roof of some kind above. I cannot see the stars."

"Remember, Babylonian, delay the attack if possible," whispered back Talmai.

"I remember," answered Nebuzaradan, with an inward groan. He was shaking as with ague. At the same moment they became conscious of the fact that the night air had crept into the closely packed mine, dissipating the nitrous exhalation of the earth. The men behind them felt the draught and swayed with eagerness. An unmistakable odour, the odour of myrrh, and frankincense, and the spices that were burned in priestly functions, floated in.

Nebuzaradan again approached the aperture and drew himself up. He disappeared into the darkness above and Talmai followed him. They soon discovered that they were in a small shrine not far from the wall, which loomed black and silent above them. It was an extempor-

ised shrine, used principally, they perceived from its location and meagre furniture, for sacrificial ceremonies when the wall was being attacked by enemies on the outside. At other times it was vacant, protected only by its sanctity. There was a clear space between it and the nearest houses, but the night was dark and the shadows were deep. In the distance could be seen the palace mound, dark, gloomy, portentous. Nebuzaradan laid a hand on Talmai's arm and pointed toward it.

Talmai nodded and cautiously stepped outside, Nebuzaradan with a sigh set about discovering a means of concealing the opening in the earth from which they had just emerged, so that the mine would not be betrayed to any chance visitor at the shrine within the next twenty-four hours—if the delay was feasible.

Silently and quickly Talmai walked to the rear of the shrine. It was mainly composed of gilded wood pillars and heavy curtains. From the rear he passed on into the deep shadow of the wall. As he did so a slight figure darted silently across the open space and crouched behind him. Talmai had ears as sharp as those of the wild animals he hunted; he stepped back and, seizing the crouching form, held it up and beheld the white face of Itti-Bel, though no sound escaped the lad's throat. There was simple entreaty in his manner. Talmai let loose his hold and strode on rapidly, hugging the wall closely. Itti-Bel accepted his silence as permission and followed him. The night was oppressive, and they knew there were vigilant sentries one hundred feet above them. Presently they came to the elbow where the north wall and the west wall met. They stopped and listened. There was a sound borne to Talmai's ears, a sound as of distant rushing waters. Strange, thought he, that the noise of the turbulent Tigris could penetrate one hundred feet of brick and rubble. On they went and, coming to a favourable spot, strode from the deep shadow of the wall into the shadows of the city. Fate was with them, and soon they found themselves in a maze of narrow streets, dark, silent, and

empty. Had they met anyone, the danger of recognition as an enemy was slight. They were dressed and accoutred like Ninevans, and an armed man with an attendant at that time of night was no rarity.

They approached a quarter where there were lights and music. To avoid it they made a long detour. Now they met citizens, but all, like themselves, were hurrying on. The hour was late, and Nineveh was in no joyous mood. The people were worn with anxiety, and, though restless and irritable in the day time, they slept at night.

They came to the wall of the house of Omar. In a few moments they would be at the gate.

Then the silence of night was split by an uproar so hideous that it seemed the curtain of darkness must be rent by it. Again and again it shook Nineveh.

Talmai knew it; it was the battle shout of the Arameans, not one but the mingled shout of tribes—Gambalian, Nabathean, Pekod, united in one frightful volley.

He stopped short.

Again and again the resonant, rending shout went up, the clamorous peal of battle, the blast of war and carnage.

"Do thou guard the house of Omar," said he to Itti-Bel. "The fight has begun. Obey me."

He pointed toward the gate.

Itti-Bel looked up at him mournfully. "I hear and obey, my master." The lad dropped on his knees and touched the edge of Talmai's tunic to his forehead. He arose and walked to the gate

Talmai turned to rejoin his comrades.

Chapter XLIV

THE TIGRIS BREAKS INTO THE CITY—TRAPPED IN THE NORTHERN GATE

AFTER Talmai and Itti-Bel vanished Urman ascended into the shrine. Somewhere in the city a dog was barking lonesomely. Bani-ya the Pekod next emerged from the mine, and his brother followed. The air was still, and they dared not converse. Soon there were a dozen or more Aramean leaders in and about the little shrine, but none spoke. Nebuzaradan, familiar with the simple furniture of such a place, groped around and located the altar and the table for holding the sacrifice.

Poor material, thought he, with which to cover from sight the hole in the earthen floor of the shrine. The shrine itself would have to be moved to accomplish this.

Bani-ya, who thirsted for glory, touched Urman on the arm and pointed in the direction of the northern gate. Urman did not understand, but when the Pekod walked away and disappeared into the night he surmised that the young warrior was bent upon a reconnoitering excursion. A feeling of awe oppressed the other Arameans, to whom it seemed a dream that they were within the walls of the great city which had withstood every artifice of her assailants for two long years. Everyway they peered their view was shut in by blackness, except where the top of the great wall made a sharp line in the heavens. It required a process of reasoning to convince them that there, before them, unprotected by the stupendous rampart which so long had shielded it, lay the city of the kings of Assyria, asleep in the confidence of safety.

Nebuzaradan endeavoured to consider the delay and inaction philosophically, and, feeling the fever of impa-

tience growing upon him, he set about the hardest undertaking of his life. He whispered to Urman his project, and they began to move the altar, which, though of stone, was low and narrow. Working noiselessly and without words, this was a tedious operation. Bani-ya, returning, assisted. The soldiers waiting below in the mine grew nervous from confinement and curiosity. They began to clamber up into the shrine, and thence outside. Neither Urman nor Nebuzaradan checked them.

It was remarkable how men clad in mail, and carrying shields and weapons, could work together thus and jostle each other, and yet not alarm the Assyrian sentinels. Confidence in security lulled the guards, and the lowering skies gave an excuse to seek a less exposed place than the battlements. Nebuzaradan and Urman did not observe that the number of Arameans on the ground had grown into a small army of several hundred men, and was being added to as rapidly as the soldiers could crawl from the mine. Meanwhile, as rapidly as they crawled from one end of the mine, and entered Nineveh, other warriors were crowding into it at the other end, thus keeping it filled with eager expectant men.

Bani-ya could not refrain from confiding to Urman the result of his reconnaissance. "The gate is but poorly guarded," he whispered.

Urman pushed him away almost rudely. The Pekod was hot-tempered and ranged alongside the Gambalian with hostile intent.

"Hush!" some one said. The men who were at work sprang to their discarded weapons and those fully armed grasped more firmly sword or spear or shield. With ears intent they heard a noise like the quick patter of summer hail in a field of ripe corn.

"Forgive me, my brother," Urman growled under his breath.

A terrible cry came from the interior of the mine, then a confusion of noises in which could be distinguished the roar of water bursting its banks.

"The river! the river!" they heard men in the depths of the subterranean passage crying in frenzy. "Save us! Save us!"

Urman seized the warrior who was just emerging from the mouth of the mine, and jerked him up.

The men behind were struggling and fighting in the narrow vault to gain the aperture. Those above reached down and pulled out many by main strength. Nebuzaradan shook one who seemed to be less overcome until the Aramean's teeth rattled.

"What means this hubbub?" furiously demanded the Babylonian.

"The river is emptying its waters upon us," explained the other between his gasps. "The men in the mine are drowning."

Even as he spoke a great stream of water gushed from the opening, tossing men like balls from a subterranean balistæ to the right and to the left.

Nebuzaradan knew that which he dreaded, the overflow of the Tigris into the tunnel, had occurred, and he did not stay to ascertain if the men thus cast among them were dead or alive.

"Warriors!" he shouted, throwing caution to the winds. "The way back has been shut off by the gods. To the gate!"

"The Assyrians!" exclaimed Urman, pointing to the top of the wall, where a torch was visible. "Capture the gate or be slaughtered like sheep."

"To the gate!" the men shouted, clashing sword and spear against their shields.

Then into life leaped the silence, and the darkness and peace and quiet fled before the outburst of hundreds of throats. The Assyrians above them heard, those at the northern gate heard, the slumbering city was awakened.

Aiming to strike terror into the hearts of the Ninevites, the Arameans charged in a yelling unit upon the northern gate. Its suddenly aroused defenders knew not whence came the enemy. None was expected from the city side,

and the Arameans dashed in a body through the walled area in front of the open portal, descending, it appeared to the superstitious Assyrians, from out of the cloudy vault of heaven, and swooping down like the evil gods who swoop down upon the world in a storm. The shrill, wild war-cries added terror to the confusion.

Aided by the darkness, guided by Bani-ya, and led by Urman and Nebuzaradan, the Arameans hurled themselves upon the Assyrian soldiers on guard in the advanced work protecting the first gate of the three barriers which composed the northern gate. They overwhelmed them with the fury of the onslaught, trampled them to the stone pavement, and massacred them before they had wielded a weapon. In the midst of the shrieking, moaning men the swords of the two leaders played with terrible effect, and the battle cry of Urman punctuated every stroke, and at every stroke an Assyrian fell.

The first obstacle on the inside of the wall overcome, the Arameans found themselves in a position beset with perils. The gateway through the wall was one hundred and twenty feet long, twenty-five feet wide, and divided into two compartments by a gate in the centre. In each compartment a transept of seventy feet formed two recessed chambers. One, possibly both, of these transepts communicated with the battlements by means of staircases in the thickness of the wall. Thus the invaders were exposed not only front and rear, but also from above.

No sooner did the Arameans become master of the first compartment than they spread over it and the recesses of the transept, even to the middle gate which cut them off from the second compartment. It was a dark and gloomy void. Those Assyrians on guard who had not rushed to the entrance and been killed there had fled up the stairs to the battlements and towers above, where for a while the impression prevailed that the entire gateway was in possession of the invaders.

The total darkness, the lack of resistance, and a dread

of the unknown speedily affected the Arameans. The courage of many of them began to ebb. Beyond the stout middle partition was the outer gate facing the open country where their army was encamped. In the next compartment there must be a large body of Assyrians.

If this condition of doubt and uncertainty had continued for any length of time the Arameans might have been seized with some such panic as that which had just undone the Assyrians. Other causes were operating in their favour. The Arameans on the outside of the city in pursuance of the pre-arranged plan had begun an assault upon the gate. It was the younger Pekod who verified this. He applied his ear to the barrier and caught the sound of attack upon the outer gate. He called for Urman. The Gambalian responded.

"If we do not hasten and capture the middle gate, my brother," remarked Banu-sin, with an affectation of coolness which he did not possess, "our brother sons of Aram will do it for us and thus shame us."

His language needed no interpretation to Urman or Nebuzaradan. In a few words they agreed to close the gate in their rear to prevent attack from the city. They hurried back to the mouth of the passage, and, as the mechanism that held the ponderous leaves was very simple, they soon swung them together and were adjusting the bolts and bars when there came to their ears from the direction of the city the clamour of fighting men, and the clicking clash of swords upon metal. Then the shuffling of many feet, a mighty rush, and a stentorian call, clear and vibrant.

"Open the gate!" cried Urman, tearing away at the bolts.

"Art mad?" demanded Nebuzaradan, grasping him by the arm.

"Back!" savagely replied the Gambalian. "'Tis the son of Mathan! Open!"

Nebuzaradan comprehended and with impetuous

energy assisted in parting the weighty leaves, which swung back slowly in their stone sockets.

Meanwhile Urman was yelling encouragement to Talmai, who, after having made a running fight, had been brought to bay at the gate by his pursuers and was battling unequally, with both his swords in use. Fortunately, there were no bowmen or spearmen among them.

The Gambalian slipped between the creaking halves of the gate and, roaring like an enraged bull, ran to Talmai's succour. Nebuzaradan came next, and others. The Assyrians, already daunted by the terrible sword-play of one man, shrank back, and Talmai darted from the circle of foes. They rallied and again surrounded him, but not before the Gambalian reached his side, and now their weapons sent the sparks flying as the swords fell upon steel blades and metal helmets. Into the circle about the two plunged Nebuzaradan, and the three fought back to back, all the while edging steadily toward the half-open gate. So vigorously were they plied that the vociferous Gambalian could not raise his war cry. Into the advanced work they struggled, and there the confined space made the contest more equal. Up to the yawning gate the whirling mass eddied, and at the moment that it seemed the small band would be annihilated by force of number Nebuzaradan, breaking away from the human vortex, escaped into the gateway, rallied the Arameans for a desperate sortie, and with them audaciously assumed the aggressive. Darkness favoured them, and their impetuous charge dismayed the Ninevites. Urman perceived the value of the opportunity and covertly informed Talmai, who doubled his activity while Urman urged the other Arameans into the vaulted passage. The Assyrians could not see the manœuvre, and in a pause of the conflict Talmai and those with him turned and darted behind the leaves. It was a retreat, but a judicious one, and before the enemy realised what had happened the halves of the gate came together, bolts shot into sockets, bars dropped

into staples, and the massive barrier was firmly fixed between the opposing forces.

Nebuzaradan wiped the perspiration from his face. "By Nergal!" he exclaimed. "It was worth the journey to see thy double sword-play, son of Mathan. I know now why they term thee 'Two-handed.'"

Chapter XLV

THE COMBAT IN THE VAULTED GATEWAY

THE Arameans breathed themselves, gathered together, and considered their chances. They were in the cityward compartment of the passageway of one hundred and twenty feet through the great wall, and the place was totally dark. In their rear were the infuriated Assyrian soldiers against whom they had just closed the gate. In front of them was the compartment next to the outer gate. Dripping gory sweat and reeking human blood they leaned, so many of them as could lean, against the middle gate, and while they panted and listened the muffled click and clash of metal against metal and weapon against wood came to them as if from a subterranean smithy wherein the imps of the underworld hammered furiously at imprisoning walls. But they knew that the sounds came not from below, but from the outer gate, where their tribesmen were battling for admittance.

"Hearest thou aught in the gateway beyond?" Talmai asked Urman, in a low voice.

"I listen, my lord, and can hear naught," the Gambalian replied.

The silence of the vaulted passage in which the clangour at the gate reverberated with sepulchral insistence was ghastly. In the compartment itself, however, no sound originated, and they knew not if it communicated with the battlements by stairs running upward through the thickness of the wall. All they knew was that there were two barriers and one long compartment between themselves inside of Nineveh and their brethren on the outside. The gate protecting them from the Assyrians on the street might be broken down at any moment and

at any moment the Assyrians on the wall might descend by the stairs in overwhelming number.

The sharp ear of Bani-ya settled one doubt. "I hear armed men moving about," said he. "They are not few," he added.

Something must be done, and done at once, to better their position, ere the Assyrians in the city could inform the Assyrians on the wall that the enemy consisted comparatively of a mere handful, and was penned within the passage. Thus far, in the din and confusion, this had been impossible.

"Hark ye, Arameans," said Nebuzaradan in a cautious voice. "We are now in a trap of our own making. The net of the enemy is over us and about us, but the gods, our helpers, are beside us. It is to them we must appeal for aid in deceiving the Assyrians that lurk between us and our brothers into a surrender."

A buzz of assent denoted that the Arameans realised their situation.

"Do thou, Urman, command them to surrender," said Talmai.

Urman strode up to the heavy wooden partition and pounded vigorously upon it with his sword handle. Again and again he pounded and only silence followed.

"Beware, Arameans," said he, "beware of a sudden rush."

He stopped talking and resumed hammering on the gate.

A voice was heard through the thick partition. All listened, and Urman beat more vigorously than before on the mail-studded wood.

"Cease thy clamour," a voice on the other side said.

"Open to the great king!" commanded the Gambalian. The Arameans crept up closer to hear the parley. Talmai and Nebuzaradan pushed them back and formed them in such manner that a light would not betray their weakness in number. They held themselves ready for an instantaneous dash into the other compartment.

Urman heard a slight grating sound and stepped back, expecting the Assyrians to dart upon him. Then he saw a thin shaft of light above his head. A wicket in the gate had been partly opened.

"Thus saith the great king," spoke he in a strident voice, "the king of Babylon and of Accad and Sumer: Into his hands deliver yourselves, and he will regard you favourably; resist, and in the gristmill of his anger will his armies grind you, and not one among ye will be left."

The wicket was closed while the Assyrians digested the message. Its opening, brief as was the interval, brought joyous sounds to the ears of the Arameans. They distinctly heard their comrades beating upon the outer gate, and could even distinguish the battle cries. When Urman ceased they gave vent to their feelings in a series of yells that made the passage where they were, and the chambers of the transept, ring and continue to ring. To the Assyrians in the compartment beyond it carried fear and dismay. The wicket was once more opened and the voice asked:

"Who among ye is the great man?"

"The warriors of Talmai, king of the Nabatheans are we," replied Urman. "I, Urman, prince of the Gambalians, command you to surrender. The forces of the great king are plundering thy city of Nineveh and setting it on fire. The savage barbarians from the land of the Medes are breaking in thy outer gate. Deliver yourselves, and King Talmai will extend mercy and spare your lives."

Again the wicket closed. The Arameans beat their swords upon their shields and shouted themselves hoarse, for the sounds of the attack upon the outer gate were more distinct than before. The reopening of the wicket stilled their voices.

"What security, what pledge, prince of the Gambalians, dost offer us?"

The question nonplussed Urman. "Unfasten the bolts

and take refuge upon the city wall," he answered at a venture. "In the capitulation will I not forget ye."

"To the wall we cannot go up from here," replied the Assyrian spokesman.

Urman could have shouted with joy. There was one less source of danger. These Assyrians were in a trap, too. His joy, however, was suddenly dashed by an ominous pounding on the gate behind them, the gate opening upon the city.

"Shout! Yell! Sound your battle cries!" hoarsely commanded Nebuzaradan.

Then, under the protection of the noise that followed, he said to Urman: "The Assyrians in the city are fierce upon us. We must cut short those in front."

Urman needed not to be told. In the pounding behind them he recognised the work of a battering ram, an engine that would soon break the gate. The frightful din deceived the Assyrians of the adjoining compartment into believing that the Arameans were being reinforced.

"Surrender immediately," roared Urman, "or breakfast with Allat!"

"To thee, then Gambalian, and to thy lord of Nabathea we deliver ourselves," responded the Assyrian. "In the word of mercy thou hast spoken do according to all thy heart."

"By the sixty-thousand gods!" hissed Nebuzaradan. "Hasten them, Gambalian. The gate behind us no longer can withstand the assaults, and the soldiers from the w above are creeping down upon us."

Once more Urman hammered upon the partition.

"Haste thee, Assyrian!" he cried, "else I cannot assure thy safety."

He leaned forward, and a glad sound struck his ear. He heard the bolts being drawn and the great wooden beams being lifted from their staples and dropped to the stone pavement. He heard, too, the percussive attack of his own people on the front gate, and he heard the Assyrians behind him smashing in the cityward gate

with a battering ram. The reverberation of its strokes shook the wall above them, and groaning echoes arose from mysterious recesses.

The Assyrians in the rear felt the breath of victory.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

Louder and louder swelled the ancient cry of battle, louder and louder, punctuating the clangour and din of attack as detonations punctuate the rumble and roll of thunder.

Would the surrendered Assyrians hear it?

The gate creaked and a ray of light thin as the edge of a sword showed where the leaves had parted.

The Arameans trembled with eagerness.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!" cried the exultant Assyrians in their rear.

The leaves wavered as if in doubt.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

The leaves stopped.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

This time it was the surrendered Assyrians who gave utterance to the shout.

The leaves moved toward each other.

"Charge, Arameans!" Talmai thundered, and threw his full weight against the closing halves. One half, moving more rapidly than the other, settled in place, and the other closed upon him as he dashed forward, pinioning him against the stationary leaf. For a flashing second he thought he was to be crushed, but his companions, following him, shoved him forward out of the vice and into the midst of the heaving Assyrians who were pushing the gate together.

Simultaneously the two leaves rolled back on their sockets, and the Arameans jumped upon their foes like lions upon a group of lambs, for the Assyrians had dropped their weapons in the effort to reclose the gate.

"Kill and spare not!"

It was unnecessary to give the order.

The shrieks of the stricken and the moans of the dying

were now added to the awful uproar, and those Assyrians who had stood wavering and uncertain along the entire length of the stairways in the wall fell upon the Arameans from the rear.

The engagement in front lasted but a few moments. The Assyrians there were killed or rendered helpless, and the torches thrown down, and the flames trampled out. Again the combatants were in total darkness.

"Lights! lights!" cried the Assyrians who had descended from the wall.

Then with a mighty crash the cityward gate gave way, and the passage was illuminated to its farthest corner by the torches brought by the shrieking, yelling Ninevites. The only gate remaining was the outer one opening upon the moat. There the Arameans must make their stand, facing their foes.

"After me, Arameans!" Talmai commanded.

As one man they ran for the end of the passage nearest the moat. If they could open that gate before they were all slain Nineveh would be taken.

At first the Assyrians failed to grasp the meaning of the flight. They thought the Arameans terror-stricken.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!" they yelled, cheered, howled and hooted, and dashed down the passage to exterminate the audacious enemy whose weakness in number they were just beginning to realize. Their torches went out as they ran.

"Do thou, son of Dunanu," said Talmai to Urman, "with a part of our force attack the fastenings of the gate. I with the others will stand as a bulwark between thee and the enemy."

Instead of waiting for them, Talmai rushed to meet the Assyrians, swinging two swords in their midst, and soon the dark corner was running with blood. The onrushing Assyrians slipped in the gore of their countrymen, they fell cursing and screaming. They were trampled underfoot in the crush of warriors.

Nebuzaradan and the Pekod princes fought on the

right and left of Talmai. The enemy came from the wall stairs and the city. Lights flashed and faded; men piled in heaps, and yet their number continued to increase. Weapons struck fire, metal clashed upon metal, hoarse commands commingled with snarls and maledictions, and fallen men spouted blood upon the stone pavement. Slowly back to the gate Talmai and those with him were driven. Under their cover, upon Talmai's hurried orders, hastily, but with perfect order, the Arameans not engaged in plucking and pulling at the rusty and intricate fastenings formed in two lines. They had seized the spears of the disabled Assyrians, and the strongest line was composed of spearmen, standing erect and guarded by their shields. In front of them crouched swordsmen, and behind them stood the reserves, ready to take the places of the dead or wounded. Back of this human bulwark Urman and his men struggled with bolts, bars, chains, and other impedimenta which held the gate fast.

Talmai and the Pekods joined the swordsmen, and while the spearmen thrust and parried, the crouching figures, unperceived in the fitful obscurity, hacked at the legs or disembowelled the advancing Assyrians. Kill, however, and disable as fast as they could, heap up ramparts of the dead, and tear at the gate until their fingers bled, they were doomed to extinction unless conditions changed, and changed speedily.

Meanwhile the Arameans left on the outside of the city when the mine was flooded, acting under instructions previously given by Talmai, completed the work of filling the moat with stones and earth and, confiscating a battering ram, rolled it up to the outer gate. This was not accomplished without the most determined resistance and frightful loss of life. After the first alarm the Assyrians on the wall were alert to the danger from this source and resisted the encroachment with the utmost vigour. From the battlements they lowered on chains great masses of burning bitumen-saturated cloths which threw a glare over all the besiegers. They hurled huge stones and

poured scalding pitch upon them, and showered upon them arrows and javelins, but no loss could daunt the Arameans, for they saw victory ahead.

The resounding blows of this battering ram on the outer portal of the northern gate stimulated the Arameans penned in the passage and added strength to their arms.

Urman, who was now joined by Nebuzaradan, worked feverishly and ferociously at the rusty bars, bolts, and chains. Blood spurted from the Gambalian's fingers. His deep growls and the laboured breathing of the Babylonian told each where the other was clutching, pulling, hauling, and lifting. Thinner and thinner grew the buffer of Arameans between them and the Assyrians.

Bani-ya, fighting by the side of Talmai, bent forward as though to kneel, straightened up, clutched at an arrow embedded in his throat, and pitched forward helplessly, on his face. Banu-sin caught him by the heels and dragged him back among the Arameans. The young Pekod saw that his brother was mortally wounded, but made no moan. He picked up the inert body and carried it back near where Urman was tugging at the mechanism of the gate. He placed it beneath the belly of one of the winged bulls that ornamented the passageway. It was a comparatively safe place, should the gate give way suddenly. Then he returned to the front rank.

The Assyrians passed torches along their massed line, and the weakness of the Aramean force became fully revealed to them. It was no longer a blind contest in the dark between unknown foes. Louder, and fiercer, and shriller arose their exultant cries. The torches cast a lurid glow over the scene and illuminated the blood-spattered walls and arched ceiling. The faces and arms of the Arameans were red with blood, their clothes were soaked with it, and the place where they stood was a shambles.

The Gambalian chief began to sing at his work in a hoarse, cracked voice. He was famishing for water. The Babylonian worked on sturdily and silently. They felt something wet underfoot and thought it was blood.

Before they gave heed to it the fluid was over their feet and the struggling men in the passage splashed in it. Where the foes faced each other in the flickering light and stabbed, thrust, hacked, and parried the fluid was pink in colour. Steadily it rose until the disabled men who fell were drowned.

The light not only revealed the weakness of the Arameans, but showed the Assyrians how they might use their arrows. But for the pressure behind them, they could have retreated the length of the passage and shot the Arameans to death from a safe distance. The nearest transept, which was not more than twenty-five feet from the dwindling mass of Arameans, was so densely packed with Assyrians that their bowmen, finding no other means of vantage, climbed on the backs of fellow soldiers and from there began to shoot their arrows at the Arameans.

"We are lost," said Banu-sin to the man next him. As he spoke an arrow cut through the man's shield and pierced his sword arm.

"We sup with Allat this night," he answered, breaking the shaft and pulling it out of his flesh.

"Courage," said Talmai. "Our comrades are battering down the gates."

"Courage," the men repeated, and the word passed from mouth to mouth.

The Assyrians beheld the effect of their archery with renewed shouts. They cried to those in the rear to send forward more bowmen. They chanted songs of triumph. The Arameans were dropping under the aim of the archers. Shields were poor protection at such close range.

The Arameans under Talmai fought desperately.

Suddenly the head of the battering ram crashed through the gate.

The singing stopped as though every tongue had been paralysed. The Assyrians stood aghast.

"Kill! Slay!" shouted the Babylonian, seizing up his weapons and running to the side of Talmai.

"Courage, my friends, the gate is falling!" shouted Talmai, and he and Nebuzaradan plunged into the midst of the Assyrians, who fell before them right and left.

Urman climbed to a new hole the battering ram had made and thrust through it a shred of cloth hoping to attract the attention of the besiegers at the gate. He called stentoriously to those outside. At first his voice was unheeded in the din, but finally some one in authority heard and responded.

"Push in the gate," Urman cried. "The bars are broken."

"We must, or be drowned where we stand," a voice answered. "The river has launched a deluge upon us and is flooding the land."

"Break down the gate!" yelled back Urman.

The message passed like lightning down the lines of the assembled army of Arameans. Already the Medes were turning out, but as yet they knew not the advantage the newcomers among them had gained. Barely half an hour had passed since Urman, Talmai, and their companions had been shut off from escape and perforce opened the attack. Three-fourths of these companions were dead.

As the remnant of the Arameans turned upon the astounded Assyrians the great leaves of the gate began to sway and crack and then swung back to the stone bumpers with such force that all within their radius fell sprawling.

Instantaneously a great flood of water poured into the passage in such volume and force that the Arameans in its path were lifted off their feet and hurled bodily against the Assyrians, who were so dazed by this new visitation of evil that they offered no resistance. After the flood of water came the flood of armed men into Nineveh.

Up to the transept Talmai, Urman, Nebuzaradan, Banu-sin, and those with them hewed and carved a way through the Assyrians before the reinforcements from the outside reached them. The Assyrians further down the passage knew that there had been a great catastrophe

to their cause, but those beyond were ignorant of any reverse. The entrance of the enemy could have been checked by closing the middle gate and repairing the inner one, but no leader retained sufficient self-command to act in the critical moment. Something more dreadful than the advent of the enemy had happened, and the thought of this dread calamity benumbed the faculties of the Ninevites.

The river had turned against the city.

Though the force of the first wave was spent when it reached the transept, the deluge from the moat followed in an irresistible stream and dashed and swirled among the penned-in Assyrians who were now falling in bunches before the revengeful Arameans. Through the gateway it flowed in a powerful current, carrying in its bosom the blood of the dead and dying.

Thus the Tigris invaded Nineveh.

"The deluge of Rimmon!" cried the Assyrians, and horror grew when they saw that the crimson flood stained their garments the colour of blood.

Into the midst of a terror-stricken army the ensanguined tide swept, and soon it mingled with the torrent which gushed from Nebuzaradan's tunnel.

Chapter XLVI

IN THE PALACE OF ASSURBANIPAL

THE northern gate captured, Talmai's sole desire was to resume his quest for Sherah. He hastily informed Urman and Nebuzaradan of his intent and darted up a side street, joined some panic-stricken Ninevites, and soon arrived at the gate of the merchant's house. As he stepped under the arch where the porter lodged, a light from a barred window shone upon him, and he heard Itti-Bel's voice say: "It is he."

The door was opened, revealing Omar's trusted steward, the Ionian, and the porter. They stared on beholding him drenched in blood.

"Forego words," said he to the steward. "Dost recognise thy master's seal?"

The steward took the hand and pressed the ring to his forehead.

"Bring me fresh garments. Nay, I go with thee."

Talmai explained what was wanted, and the steward hurried them into the yard and to the main residence, where the Nabathean rid himself of the evidences of carnage, and from the piles of clothing and armour laid before him selected that which would not betray his alienage in Nineveh. He put on the Assyrian bronze helmet with lappets, a sleeveless coat of mail, a rich cloak and plaid tunic in the Assyrian mode, Assyrian sandals and leggings, and even the baldric which held his two swords and the belt which held his two daggers were of Assyrian design. Then he bade the steward to take a torch and conduct him to the former treasure chamber.

Itti-Bel followed.

On Talmai's order the steward opened the door.

"This apartment keep open," Talmai commanded, having in mind his return with Sherah.

"My lord, leave me not behind," impetuously interposed Itti-Bel. "It may be that I can be of service. And if thou dost perish I can aid in avenging thee."

Talmai nodded assent and hurried through the first room to the room beyond, the steward lighting the way. The servant's amazement was depicted in his face when he beheld his master's friend roll a panel aside and uncover the cavernous mouth of the Passage of the Thieves. Then the Nabathean and the youth disappeared into the opening, and the panel slid back into place. They had no light, but walked with certain feet down the stone stairs to the level of the subterranean passage and proceeded along its course. When they got to the wall which shut off entrance to Assurbanipal's palace on the royal mound Talmai felt about until he found the spring which released the clutch on the movable panel. In a second more he and Itti-Bel stood within the ancient treasure vault of Assurbanipal.

They ascended the stairs to the palace level, expecting to be guided in their course there by sounds of voices, but the silence was unbroken. Talmai could form no idea of what part of the labyrinthine structure he stood. The palace of Assurbanipal was a huge maze in which they might spend the remainder of the night in vain wandering. His destination was that other palace on the mound, the palace of Sennacherib, where the great king dwelt, and where he hoped to find Sherah. Soldiers and their families inhabited the habitable portions of the palace of Assurbanipal. If he were in the part of the palace reserved exclusively for women he would be killed without an opportunity to communicate with Zirya.

Zirya.

The name aroused a new thought. His dependence was on this eunuch, born his brother.

"I know the way, my lord," said Itti-Bel.

"Thou?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then set forth, my good Itti-Bel."

The lad started, and, though hesitating once or twice, he went forward, and presently they heard voices, the rattling of arms, and the tread of feet. The slumbering palace had awakened and become vocal with a thousand sounds, while from the northern gate came the uproar of strife. Torches in the hands of running slaves and soldiers flashed by and revealed curtained doors and shadowy perspectives, scenes which vanished with as much suddenness as they appeared, and were again and again illumined, until after awhile the interior of the palace was fitfully lighted by these gusts of flame, the wandering and frightened occupants rushing around aimlessly or congregating in agitated groups in halls and courts.

The cry went around that the enemy had broken into the city, and the women, hearing the far-off notes of battle, began to wail.

There were many apparelled like Talmai, yet if he had appeared there in the garb of an enemy it is doubtful that he would have been denounced, so great the confusion in the dimly and intermittently lighted corridors. Every room in the palace was connected more or less directly with one of the four great interior courts, and as it was through some great court that he must make his way to the exterior, Talmai and Itti-Bel set about to find the nearest. This they accomplished and joined a stream of humanity which carried them on into an unusually long, narrow, highly decorated hall wherein there was a large number of human-headed winged lions.

"Note well the passage, Itti-Bel," Talmai said in a low tone, "that all the easier may be our departure hence."

"Departure!" the man next the Ionian said, catching the one word. "Is it true we must depart into the city? Is the great king driving us from the mound?"

"I know not," answered the Nabathean, thus directly appealed to.

"Dost believe the enemy hath entered the city?" the Ninevite anxiously inquired.

"Without doubt it is so," Talmai answered. "Hearest thou not the battle shouts within the gates?"

Others beside the questioner, walking close to the Nabathean and listening eagerly, accepted his words, as they would have accepted the word of any man who spoke with decision.

"It is truth," repeated one to another.

"What say they?" those further on asked.

"The enemy has captured the city!"

"The enemy has captured the city!"

Up and down the fateful rumour flew, and men shuddered, and women wailed. Every repetition of it was additional proof to excited minds, though there were those who doubted.

"The gods forbid," some cried.

"It is a lie," continued the doubters.

"The city they may have captured," said one who had just been aroused from slumber, "but the king's mound never can be taken. Here are we safe."

"Nay, fool," answered the man who had addressed Talmai, "the great king has ordered all save his men-at-arms to be driven from the mound that he may have less mouths to feed when they lay siege to him."

The other started back with astonishment. Then the thought of what would follow came to him.

"My wife! my daughter!" he groaned.

The cries, the interrogations increased in volume. Dismay and distress steadily replaced doubt and anxiety.

"Where are our captains?"

"Where are our soldiers?"

"What doeth the great king?"

A few laughed bitterly at this last interrogation. Many were sullenly silent.

"Among his women," a bold voice answered.

Rebellious mutterings spread through the crowd.

"Silence."

"They are fighting——"

"Our warriors are beating them back."

In the sudden hush the noise of combat was audible to all.

"Assur and Istar is with us!" one shouted.

"O Assur, cast down the enemy!"

"O goddess who protects the city——"

"O Mother Istar, strike them to the earth!"

"To the temple! To the temple!"

The excited Ninevites swept on through two smaller halls, and, availing themselves of this guidance, Talmai and Itti-Bel presently emerged upon the broad terrace of the palace. The fresh air was good. From there they could see by the lights of many torches all over the mound. The palace of Sennacherib loomed up as a huge, dark mass on the western verge. In front of them rose the temple tower, tier upon tier, and dwindling to a point in the dark sky. Clouds were gathering about the summit.

But above all other noises, above and through the din and clamour of men who dreaded a danger most because they knew not when it would overpower them, above and through the shrill bewailing of women who lamented beforehand the fate of their sex, above and through the supplicatory chorus of the priests of the temples clustered about the tower, above and through all these mingling sounds of fear, terror, and hope, Talmai heard the familiar, fierce battle cries of the Arameans, now faint as a cricket's note, then clear as a lark's song, now smothered for a moment, then rising like the quavering, staccato howl of wild beasts of the jungle. He thought he could even distinguish Urman's voice.

The Ninevites, with their hearing attuned to another cry, heard the grand battle shout of their warriors—

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

"What is in the heart of my lord?" asked Itti-Bel.

Talmai had forgotten his presence. He looked down at

Itti-Bel absently, as if to identify the speaker. Then he smiled at the lad and made a comprehensive sweeping gesture with his arms toward the temples, the dark bulk against the sky which outlined the palace of Sennacherib, the other buildings of the mound, and finally the palace out of which they had just come forth.

Itti-Bel understood.

Where in these vast buildings surmounting the hundred acres of the king's mound, where among the mazes of these mysterious, far-spreading palaces was the object of their search?

Chapter XLVII

STRIPPING THE MOUND FOR A SIEGE—THE FALSE MESSENGER

THE unpreparedness of the Assyrians on the mound surprised Talmai. Though the main stairway from the city to the top of the mound was in plain view, owing to the number of torches ablaze, he could see nothing doing for its defence. On the contrary, unarmed men were running about excitedly, helpless and confounded. Soldiers, however, were busy, but Talmai had not up to this time perceived them.

Moving to the northeastern side of the palace, whence the noise of battle from the northern quarter of the city was plainest, he saw from the lights in all directions that the entire city was aroused. In the turmoil he could distinguish the clatter of running horses and chariots, the clashing of weapons, and the collision of combat.

"Listen, Itti-Bel," he said. "It is better we search apart. Couldst find again the Thieves' Passage?"

"Yes, my lord."

"In doubt or danger flee to it. Wander not far from this spot. I go to seek Zirya the eunuch."

Talmai had gone but a short distance when he was made aware that the Assyrian warriors were at work, and operating on a concerted plan to strip the mound for action. Having rounded up from the palaces, the barracks, the armories, the granaries, and the stables all those dependants who would be useless consumers of provision in the event that the mound itself was besieged, they were now driving this mob of unorganised underlings to the main flight of stairs, there to be forced into the streets below.

Later they would tear down the staircases.

It was a cursing, weeping, raving and beseeching mass of men, women and children, who hurried and scurried back and forth, in a narrowing ring bounded by a fence of spears which pressed cruelly those who went against it. They hurled themselves face downward and grovelled before the line of iron that was closing in like a net on all sides except where the open stairway yawned. Soon the shrieks and curses of the injured told that the spearmen had changed passive pressure to brutal aggressiveness. The greater illumination accompanying the movement of the guards revealed warriors in pursuit of those unfortunates who had escaped the dragnet, and screams for mercy were warnings to those others who vainly struggled in the meshes.

It was also a critical moment for Talmai. He perceived that it would be impossible to break through the line. If driven off the mound he must make the circuit of the Thieves' Passage to get back to his starting point. Joining those who had abandoned hope of remaining on the mound and were hastening to the stairs with household goods and children in their arms, he came to the little open shrine on the landing place at the head of the double stairs. Though the din created by the people around him was almost deafening, he could tell by the noise of battle below that the conflict was becoming more general, and that larger bodies of men were getting into the action as Arameans continued to pour into the city, and Assyrians massed for the defence.

Despite his own danger, Talmai could spare sympathy for the miserable wretches who were being expelled from the mound to be plunged into the arms of the enemy. Their grief was heartrending. Many clung for a moment of respite to the bronze stanchions of the shrine ere they descended to the city.

Talmai moved with the stream, thinking what to do. He noticed that there were no guards at the head of the stairs, and a project began to take shape in his mind.

Up the stairs from the city, loudly proclaiming his mission, sword in hand, came a messenger for the king.

"A message for the king!" he yelled at every step, and the people whom he struck with his weapon or were knocked down and trampled upon, repeated in palliation of their cowardice:

"A messenger for the king!"

Strong men who beat the feeble aside and the pusillanimous who from above saw him coming cried aloud the words, and somehow a path was made for the messenger. His conical helmet appeared on a level with the landing-place, and Talmai drew his sword and stepped forward. When the shoulder of the man came within grasping distance he seized him and lifting him bodily to the platform dashed the amazed Assyrian to the stone flagging.

"Haste!" Talmai said, putting his foot on the messenger's neck. "The password or thou diest."

The soldier, never doubting that the man who dealt so summarily with him was the officer of the watch, gave the password:

"Istar, who makes battle fierce."

"Thy message, that I may convey it."

The soldier would have resisted, but Talmai dragged him to his feet and clutching him by the throat raised his sword as if to strike.

"Thy message," he again demanded.

"The enemies of our gods have broken through the northern gate, my lord," he stammered, "and are in the city."

"That is not all."

"No, my lord," and here the messenger's teeth chattered with another kind of fear. "The river has turned against Nineveh."

Talmai released his hold upon the man as the significance of the last statement flashed into his mind. The dazed soldier observing the opportunity to escape darted down the staircase.

"A message for the king!" shouted Talmai, starting back upon the mound, cleaving the throng of humanity which the Assyrian guard had succeeded in bunching at the head of the stairs.

"Way for the king's messenger!" commanded these soldiers, hearing his words, and thrusting their barbs into the squirming mass.

"A messenger for the king!" the harassed unfortunates repeated, crushing back upon the weaker ones, who moaned or shrieked or blasphemed.

Thus Talmai found a path, and when he reached the iron line of pikes those weapons, stained with the blood of the weak, separated for him and the cry of "Way for the king's messenger!" was caught up and preceded him to the portals of the palace of Sennacherib. Even there doors flew open before him, curtains parted hastily, lights suddenly appeared, and without stop or hindrance he rushed into the Court of the Courtiers, and into the presence of the vizier of the great king surrounded by the few princes and great men whose duties did not compel their presence elsewhere in the defence of the king's city. It was indeed a meagre court, and showed plainly to what straits the empire had fallen.

"Speak, messenger!" commanded the vizier in placid tones.

Talmai knew his part. Prostrating himself before the nobleman, he said no word, but awaited a second bidding to speak. His ominous behaviour brought exclamations of dismay to the lips of the princes. The bearer of good news would not have remained silent. The vizier lifted his hand, and the princes were still.

"Though evil be thy message, I command thee to speak," he said.

Talmai still prostrated, kissed the hem of his robe.

"May my lord incline his face to me. The enemies are indeed in the city, my lord."

He could hear the rustling of robes, but no Assyrian made comment.

"Say on," the vizier commanded. "What thou hast said we know."

"The northern gate is in their hands, my lord, the southern totters."

The noblemen could no longer restrain themselves.

"It is false!" said one.

"Slay the lying messenger!" exclaimed another.

Talmai trusted the vizier, who turned with a fierce face upon them.

"Are we barbarians?" he asked bitterly. The rebuke stung them into silence.

"Say on, messenger," he commanded for the third time.

"The river has turned against the city, my lord. The flood is filling the streets."

A groan went up from the group of noblemen. They were angry before; now dread was in every heart. The vizier alone maintained an attitude of dignity, though his hand trembled as he fingered his scarf of office.

Talmai also observed a coming and going in the group and knew that his depressing information was being scattered throughout the palace.

"Arise, messenger," said the vizier in the same calm tone of voice.

Talmai arose, and his eyes swept in one hawklike glance the semicircle of intent faces bent upon him. Zirya was there. They recognised one another, but made no sign.

Whatever the vizier had upon his tongue was not uttered, for another sound broke in upon them. It came with the cry:

"A message for the king!"

Talmai was forgotten.

"A message for the king!"

"Way for the king's messenger!"

Through the portals of the court there rushed an Assyrian soldier with drawn sword. Perceiving the vizier, he ran forward and prostrated himself as Talmai had done.

"Speak, thy message, soldier," he was ordered.

"May my lord live eternally: Arbaila the general and Sunu the prefect to the great vizier raise their hands. They ask for aid to sweep away the attacking foe. Incense, prayer, and sacrifice to the fire-god they ask."

"Have the foes entered the city?"

"My lord the bars of the northern gate have been broken. Their advance is as the flood of the warrior-god."

"Do the other gates hold?"

"The Babylonians closely assault the southern gate. The others are threatened."

The vizier turned to the scribe at his side and dictated instructions for the moving of troops to reinforce the general at the northern gate, adding as he indicated Talmai and the genuine messenger:

"Let them receive the royal bounty."

The second messenger looked at Talmai, who was thus indicated with himself, and looked again.

"My lord," said he, "this is not the man by whom the first message from Arbaila and Sunu was sent."

"It matters little," wearily responded the nobleman. "Except," he suddenly added, "that he said the river had turned against the city."

"Thy men are fighting in water, my lord. We know not whence it comes, but this man is no soldier of Arbaila."

The messenger's persistence drew all eyes upon Talmai.

"The soldier speaks truth," interjected Zirya, "the first messenger is in the great king's service."

The mention of the king turned their gloomy thoughts into another channel.

"Is my lord the king resolved in his intent?" the vizier asked of Zirya.

"The resolution of his heart is unchanged."

The noblemen glanced at one another.

"The great king," said Zirya continuing, "commands all his princes and great men to make peace with the enemy."

"And thou?"

"My lord the king has deigned to crown my life with a glorious honour and privilege."

"Thou art of the king's guard, then?" the second messenger asked Talmai under his breath.

Talmai did not reply.

"Let it be known to the king," said the vizier to Zirya, "that we are not children. No terms can we make with the rebels who have broken the oath of the great gods, the gods of the king of Assyria."

"Then will the great men here assembled defend and hold this mound until the sacrifice of the ancient seed-royal is accomplished?" There was an element of doubt in Zirya's tone.

"All shall go down along with the king," whispered the messenger to Talmai, "yet the face of the king have we not seen."

Again the noise of an approaching messenger was heard, and a moment later he was delivering his news.

"Nuru the perfect sends greeting, my lord. The Babylonians have captured the advanced work of the southern gate, and the prefect says: May the king turn his face to his men, may he send troops to resist the strong enemy. If troops come the gate will be preserved. but if no troops come the gate of the king my lord is captured."

This information, unheralded by the preceding words of calamity, would have crushed the noblemen. As it was, they said nothing, but the vizier dictated an order to his scribe.

Zirya motioned to Talmai to wait at the entrance of the court.

"Let it be known to the king, Zirya," said the vizier, "that we are his servants, the dust of his feet. We will die with the king."

"Thy words shall be laid before the king."

"Thou art playing with fire, Prince," said the eunuch on joining Talmai.

Talmai observed his features, his manner and his entire appearance. He had trusted the eunuch from the first, and he saw no reason why he should not trust him now.

"Son of my father," said he, "I have come for my bride."

Zirya made a gesture of humiliation. "I know thy mission. I saw thee when the mute called to me. I have done all I could to find thy bride. From now on to the end my lord the king requires all my time. Gladly would I have devoted the remainder of my days to thy happiness, did the king need me not."

"Not so fast, my brother," firmly replied Talmai. "I came not here to be easily set aside."

Zirya glanced at him. There was fear in the eunuch's mind, but not for his own safety. He dreaded delay.

"Utter not the words of hostility in thy heart, son of Mathan. Take this, the king's signet, to aid thee in thy search for thy bride. Except to the secret places of the temple and the priests' houses, of which the great king himself is ignorant, it will pass thee through all doors. With it thou canst penetrate to the presence of the king. There thou wilt meet me. Go, my brother, search as I have searched. May it guide aright the wish of thy heart."

"So be it," answered Talmai, accepting the royal signet.

"Farewell, my brother."

"Farewell."

Chapter XLVIII

THE CONQUEST OF THE CITY

WOE to the bloody city! Awake, thou rejoicing one that dwelt carelessly! Raise the cry Assyrian! Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu! Down through the dark streets cometh they that dash in pieces.

The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels and of the prancing horses and of the jumping chariots; chariots with flaming torches that split the pall of night and turn the over-running waters into a vivid sea; chariots that plunge into the whirlpool of slaughter and are swallowed up in the vortex of carnage.

Blow thy horns, trumpeters, ply thy whips, captains, heap on precious myrrh and costly sacrifice, O priests!

More fierce than the evening wolves are thine enemies, O Nineveh. Into thy gates they come, as the eagle that hasteth to eat. Where art thy gods, O city of the lions, the gods of Sennacherib and of Assurbanipal? Where art thy prophetesses of divine decrees, thy makers of enchantments, thy casters of spells, O thou mistress of witchcraft? Let now the astrologers, the star-gazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up and save thee!

As a sea and its flotsam together rush through a broken dike, so rushed the men of Aram and the waters of the Tigris into the bloody city. Weapons and torches dropped from the palsied hands of the Assyrians when they beheld the red tide splashing upon them, swirling about them, and darting crimson tongues. Many fled, many were too dazed to move, but many stood steadfast and met the enemy with the courage of fatalism and discipline. Shouting their terror-inspiring battle cries, the Arameans plunged like the gods of destruction upon the

confused mass which had been left in darkness by the torchbearers, and the area of dead widened as also the expanse of water broadened.

Meanwhile Assyrian reinforcements were being hurried forward, they stopped and rallied the fugitives, and their warriors gathered anew to sweep away the attacking foe.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

The onrush of the invaders was checked. Constant accessions through the northern gate was all that prevented a rout.

Then came the charge of the Assyrian charioteers. Slipping in gore, stumbling over corpses, but contesting every inch, the Arameans were forced back. Flee they could not, if such had been their intent.

Amid the shouts and moans of men, the clash of weapons, and the rattle of chariots were heard the shrill screams of wounded horses.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

Faster and thicker rose the incense of sacrifice. The people ran to and fro. The chanting of the priests drew them to the temples where was safety, and the roaring thunder of the conflict lured them to the battle where was danger. Fathers forgot sons, and sons forgot fathers. Motherless children wailed in the darkness, and terror spread over the city.

With rattling of wheels, and snorting of horses, and jostling of chariots, the aroused hosts of Assur broke loose upon the insulters of their god.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!"

The channels of the altars run blood. The priests chanted:

"O mighty Assur, may thy power never fail!
May thy stronghold be exalted to become a shrine!
Strike the people of the blackheads with the desolation of Ner!
Overthrow them, mighty god!"

Hurled back and forth in the slime of the flood; clambering over the fallen, piercing the din with their battle shouts, the sons of Aram battled among the chariots. They were flung to the ground like slingstones, the wheels cut swathes in their closely packed ranks, but they fought on. From three sides the charioteers closed in, and the Assyrians felt the thrill of victory. The inflow of Arameans was not sufficient to withstand such odds. Men and women on the outskirts of the battle caught the infection of triumph and ceased running about in fright. The smoke of incense was as a cloud, the priests chanted joyously:

"Hurl forward thy soldiers and thy men at arms, O Nineveh, thy princes and thy great men! Marshal thy defending gods, O Assur and Istar! Turn upon them the bitter breath of the gods! O goddess who protects thy city, thou who art the mother of its inhabitants, regard thy children! O Ninazu, of darkness the mother, confound the wicked! O Adar, destroyer of the hostile, to the earth trample them!"

Then, clear above it all, rose a new cry.

Could greater horror be added to the shamble of men, horses, night, and death?

Uplifted swords paused in the air. In that brief flash of semi-silence friend and foe heard the battle-shout of the Medes. Shrill, harsh, resonant, like the ululation of thousands of wolves it smote the ear:

"Victory to the king! Mithra! Mithra!"

In their war chariots the conquerors of the north with their king at their head came raging to the conflict, lifting the bright sword and the glittering spear, and a new concert of carnage broke loose as chariots crashed together, wheels locked wheels, and lance met lance.

A group of exhausted Arameans moved out of the turmoil to breathe and take council. Two blood-bespattered figures, that had never been far apart even in the hottest of the engagement, drew near on a piece of ground to

which the flood had not yet reached and leaned on their long swords.

"A noble fight, Gambalian," said one.

"A battle for the gods, Akhi," replied the other.

The noise of the conflict was so deafening that they could with difficulty hear each other.

An Assyrian officer with a torch bearer came running, crying to his men to follow him. Urman lifted his sword to strike.

"Nay, friend," said Nebuzaradan, laughing softly, being tired, "he is but one."

Urman lowered his arm. "True," he growled, glad of an excuse to rest.

A horse that had broken from a chariot stumbled by, shaking blood from its wounds. It staggered, fell, and a bone in its leg snapped.

"Ya-ilu! Sha ya-ilu!" shouted the undaunted Ninevites.

"Victory to the king! Mithra! Mithra!" shouted the Medes.

The clamour redoubled in volume.

"Come, Gambalian," said Nebuzaradan. "No longer can I hold my hand, and my time shortens. But behold!" he added in astonishment. "Already are the Arameans pillaging." The chief turned in quick anger and looked where Nebuzaradan pointed. Some Sukhi bearing torches had broken the outer gate of a rich man's house and with ribald oaths were seizing women and valuables.

"Accursed thieves!" shouted the Gambalian, springing toward them. "Know ye not the fight is still unwon? Back to the fray!"

The Sukhi stopped in consternation.

A young and beautiful woman who was in the grasp of a giant warrior broke from him and, fleeing to Urman, clasped him about the knees.

"Save me from these bloody men, great lord," she implored.

An Assyrian who had been defending his house with a sword darted past the despoilers and pursued her.

"No slave shalt thou be," he exclaimed, and ere Urman realised his intent his sword cleaved her delicate body, and the pieces writhed separate on the ground. He laughed sardonically, and his face still bore the mask of mirth when Urman's sword leaped forth, and the Assyrian's head went to join the quivering lumps of flesh. Urman laughed as the Assyrian's tongue lolled out and twice lapped up the blood of his child.

"Turn back, ye thieves!" he yelled at the Sukhi. "Back to the battle. Spoil comes after victory!"

The tribesmen, shamed to be caught pillaging while their comrades still fought, brandished their weapons.

"Urman!" they shouted. "We follow thee, Urman!"

With this they all returned to the conflict.

The divine messenger of the dawn was seen first that morning by the priests. Sulpa-uddu they called it, the proclaimer. It rose, serene, indifferent, when all else overhead was black, and when it appeared the clouds parted and became the pink and purple and violet banners of the advancing conqueror of darkness. Quickly the stars of the east faded, but Sulpa-uddu grew in radiancy as it mounted upward. Suddenly the gilded apex of the temple tower on the royal mound began to glow, and then its burnished side caught and flashed back the first ray of the morning sun. Simultaneously the priests burst forth:

"O Sun-god, the supreme, judge of the world art thou!
O lord of the living creation, the pitiful one who directest the world!
O sun-god, on this day purify and illumine the king the son of his god!
Let all that is wrought of evil which is in his body be removed elsewhere!
Like the cup of Zoganes, cleanse him!

Like a cup of ghee, make him bright!
Like the copper of a polished table, let him be made bright!
Undo his curse!"

"Look, Gambalian!" cried Nebuzaradan, pointing to the glistening top of the temple.

Urman wiped the blood from his eyelids.

"My time is up," continued the Babylonian. "I have accomplished that which drew me here. Tell thy prince I left him not on the threshold of victory, but with victory won. Farewell, my comrade."

Urman stared vacantly for an instant, and in that instant the mysterious stranger disappeared from his sight.

Nebuzaradan noted that the flood from the Tigris now spread over the northern part of the city, and that the poorer houses of unburnt brick were rapidly melting away in the water. He found it difficult walking in the path covered by the invaders, which not only was littered with dead men and animals, but slimy and slippery from blood and ooze, and so turned aside where the elevated ground about a temple of Istar gave securer footing. No sooner had he turned than his ears were assailed by piercing screams, and presently he saw priestesses of the temple rushing out of gates with Aramean soldiers in hot pursuit. The long white garments of the women, fluttering as they ran, contrasted strangely with the blood-stained warriors who with lustful words and coarse summons seized them and dragged them back into the temple precinct. The altars and the shrines had been despoiled by other warriors, and the looting of the secret places begun.

Nebuzaradan paused at a gate through which a warrior was dragging a priestess by her long hair. She thrust forth her bare arms in mute appeal to him.

"Ha! Hagarene," said the warrior, addressing him. "Elsewhere must thou look for booty. This temple is for the Pekods."

The priestess struggled to her knees, and the Pekod roughly lifted her up to his breast.

"Slay me, lord," she prayed of Nebuzaradan.

"Free the woman," he commanded, forgetting his assumed character.

The man recoiled in indignant surprise, and the priestess slipped out of his arms. He caught her before she could escape and thrust her through with his sword. Then he smothered her in a savage embrace.

Nebuzaradan passed on. Shutting eyes and ears of pity on similar scenes with which he was by no means unfamiliar, he made his way to Talmai's tent, changed his garments, secured his horse, and started on the return to Ardiban. Across the river he stopped and turned for a last view of the last city of Assyria. He gazed at the grim walls and thought of the conflict within. The glittering half-domes of the palace of the king drew his eye, and from the centre of the palace a long, wavering spiral of smoke shot up into the air. It was gray and thin, and a puff of air cut it loose, and it went scurrying skyward; but a heavier volume arose in its place, and from this the wind snapped off little gray bunches which also went scurrying upward. This smoke was dark and rapidly grew darker and denser.

Nebuzaradan watched it intently.

The smoke curled up in great rolls. From black it changed in colour to dun, then to gray, and finally to white. Up, up the fleecy column ascended, till it reached a great height, and was seen of all men.

"The king maketh an immense sacrifice," Nebuzaradan muttered, and faced his horse toward Ardiban.

Chapter XLIX

THE PRIEST OF NEBO AND THE HOLY ORACLE—THE HOLOCAUST

DAWN revealed Nineveh in its death struggle with the allied enemy. Talmai, from his elevated position on the mound, hailed the approach of the day as the coming of a friend. All night he had searched for Sherah. At times the clangour of the mighty conflict raging in the streets lured him, but he bowed to another call. The battle-cries of the Arameans—even now ringing out—told him of the progress of the invasion. He knew when they advanced and when they fell back, and of the result there was only one period of doubt. This was when the Assyrian chariots made their first charge, and then the impulse to rush to the assistance of his comrades nearly mastered him. It was now singularly quiet on the mound, and, going to the eastern parapet, he looked down upon the convulsed city. The familiar sounds of the fierce strife of contending hosts was solace to him and rested him. Glancing over and beyond the dark city and its terrific tumult, and beyond the shadowed eastern wall with its fringe of towers and battlements, he beheld the aureola of the approaching sun. Folding his arms, he listlessly watched the amber change to chrysoprase, the chrysoprase break into an opalescent confusion of amethyst, garnet, hyacinth and jacinth, and all these fade and vanish before the rich, royal ruby of the god of light. If any of the combatants below him stopped to greet the orb he saw them not, so gloriously did it fill his horizon. A balmy wind crept in from the dry plains of the west and dallied with the smoke that curled up from the altars which everywhere in the city reeked sacrifice. From the

king's palace a thick column of smoke climbed higher than all the rest. The screams of women mingled with hoarse and strident roars of men proclaimed that the demons of lust and spoliation were loose in the smitten city, and whenever a childish treble of terror was suddenly stilled the brains of an innocent spattered the door-post of a desolate home.

Thus the day dawned, and houses and hovels, temples and cloisters, marts of trade and palace platforms appeared in the yellow flood of the Tigris like the islands of a magic archipelago. And as if touched by a magician's wand, many of these fabrics of clay were visibly crumbling and dissolving into the waters round about them.

The tranquillity of the king's mound was conducive to reflection. Talmai looked in vain for the broad platform at the summit of the double stairs where he changed places with the messenger. He discovered that not only it but the stairs to the street were gone. The inhabitants of the mound had thus cut themselves off from the city, leaving the people below to their fate. To complete the isolation of the king and court in this their citadel, intricate barricades had been erected during the night on the western city wall near the mound.

Affected by fatigue and the warmth of the sun, Talmai gazed upon the turbulent scene below as one who gazed into a vast pit where men instead of animals fought for their lives. He was of it, yet not in it. With admiration he noted the desperate resistance of the Assyrians, contesting every inch of ground. He saw here and yonder, in streets and squares, deeds of individual daring, and he saw the looters who followed close upon the heels of the fighters. He saw shrieking women, tearing their hair and beating their breast, dragged out of the hidden recesses of their homes, and he saw children dashed to pieces, and their corpses flung into the flood. He saw soldiers loading themselves with plunder, while their companions were trampled under foot in some desperate charge of the Assyrian chariotry.

The thought came to Talmai:—Who beside himself knew the secret of the underground passage by which he and Itti-Bel had gained the summit of the mound that night? Had only a few hours passed since then?

Itti-Bel, for one, knew, but where was the Ionian? Frequently during his search Talmai had looked about expecting to see him. Well, he would endeavour to find the lad.

Zirya also knew. He was with the king.

Istar-bela knew. She was with the king.

Omar, the merchant knew. He was with Nebuchadnezzar. In his anxiety for Sherah he might guide Babylonian troops through the secret way to the platform.

Talmai laughed mirthlessly as he thought of the futility of the preparations for a prolonged siege that were going on. After the capture of the city proper, which was inevitable, the walls must be conquered. Upon them the remnant of the Assyrians could take refuge and continue the contest for days. Afar off, about the gates, he could see the Assyrian warriors actively engaged in repelling the vigorous assault of the invaders, and in those parts of the city which had not been reached by the enemy he saw excited women, children, and old men driving herds of goats and sheep up the narrow inclined ways by which chariots and horses gained the summit of the walls.

He also saw terror-stricken servants dragging chattels through the streets with vague hopes that the tide of battle would not reach them, and he saw eunuchs burdened with their master's gold and silver staggering to some place where they might hide their wealth. He saw courage and despair, hope and despondency, frenzy and coolness, the basest and the noblest acts, the grandeur of men and their degradation.

How vain all these efforts!

"It is not the hour for idleness, comrade," said a voice at his elbow. Talmai turned and saw an officer of the royal guard who, unaware if he were one to be propitiated

or intimidated, decided to be discreet. "They are yet drawing water from the river."

"I am on special service, soldier, else willingly would I do my share," he replied, exhibiting the royal signet.

The other knelt and touched the ring to his forehead.

"I am the servant of the king," he responded in an apologetic tone. "Behold! the king offers an immense sacrifice to the gods."

The officer pointed to the palace, from which dense smoke was rising.

"May the heart of the god of our city and the goddess of our city, who are angry, rest," continued the Assyrian, piously, raising his hand in devotion.

"Hoar age mayst thou reach," said Talmai. The officer thanked him for the timely benediction and hurried away about his duties.

Aroused by the interruption, Talmai set forth to renew his quest. He had not proceeded far when his eyes were gladdened by the sight of Itti-Bel hastening toward him from one of the temples. The lad walked with an elastic, joyous tread and betrayed an air of triumph.

"Welcome, my friend," said the Nabathean, moved out of his habitual reserve.

"Hast thy search been rewarded?" asked Itti-Bel eagerly.

The question struck him as a reproach. "Not yet," he replied.

"'Despise no man and deem nothing impossible,' I have heard the wise Omar say."

Talmai detected a tone of exultation in the lad's voice.

"Thou hast favourable tidings, Itti-Bel."

"Dost remember the wounded priest whom Omar succoured here in Nineveh?"

"Well do I remember him, Ionian."

"Forgive my slowness of speech, my master. This night did I meet the priest, and in gratitude to us and hatred for the priest of Eridu, who stabbed him, he be-

trayed to me the secret place in which the lady Sherah is hidden."

Talmai seized the Ionian by the arm. "Lead me to that place," he commanded.

Itti-Bel started off briskly for the king's palace, Talmai with him.

"It is not near, my lord, and if thou carest to hear how I learned the secret——"

"If the recital delays us not."

"It is soon said. Shortly after thou didst quit me the king's soldiers began to drive the useless men and women off the mound. At the time, I was conveniently close to one of the temples where the head of the great tower is lifted up. Slipping into the outer court of the house of the god I groped about until I found a stone lion with outstretched wings. Upon this image I climbed, and, nestling down between wing and wall, lay still as any mouse, and was not caught, though many soldiers with torches passed, looking for such as had slipped by them. It may be I slept. The chill air of morning sent me in search of warmth, and, drawn by the lights in the sanctuary of the temples, I went there. It chanced to be the habitation of the god Nebo, and the priests were in the midst of a solemn service of supplication. Idly I watched the ceremony. In their procession to the altars of all the great gods shrined in the temple one of the priests craftily made signs to me, which after a time I interpreted to mean, 'Wait.' But here is the door of the palace, and we must enter."

The entrance was closely guarded, and the two were halted at the gate, between the rows of winged lions. Talmai produced the king's signet, at the sight of which the soldiers fell back with respectful bows and permitted them to proceed.

"Whither?" Talmai asked when they reached the first large court, which was empty, and cheerless in the half light.

"To the Chamber of Divination," answered the youth, with an involuntary shudder, recalling the moments of terror passed there, when they overheard the Great King at his devotions, with Dagon the Eridan and Suzub the Assyrian alternately swaying his distracted mind. Would the king in his dire strait offer himself as a human sacrifice to the gods?

"My story must be cut short," resumed Itti-Bel, as they continued their course through the unguarded and untenanted halls and passages. "Soon after the processional service I was called by name from the darkness outside. It was the priest who had beckoned to me, and he made himself known as the priest of Nebo whom Omar did take in and care for. He inquired why I was there and, as I was slow to answer, bluntly said: 'Thou seekest the lady Sherah.' We crouched in the shadow of the temple while he made known his intent. When he left Omar's house he swore he would avenge himself and set about to discover why he had been stabbed—Oh, he is a bitter man, my lord. He was transferred to the temple of the mound by his superior and fumed with the thought that his vengeance could not be executed, and his soul was vexed until, one day, he beheld the man whom he was seeking. It was the Oracle of Eridu. As a sycophant he fastened himself on the Eridan, who recognised him not, having seen him but once, and then in the darkness of night. He learned not only how it came about that he was stabbed at Omar's gate in mistake for thee because he wore a certain cloak, but also why the old priest clung to Nineveh. The recovery of the Amulet of Bel was a holy obligation, and part of the Oracle's plan to regain it was to seize and hold a certain young virgin attached to the king's court. Full ransom would she be for the Amulet.

"The knowledge of these things did not dull the edge of the man of Nebo's revenge. Who was this maiden he knew not, until he saw her and saw that she was the

daughter of Omar. In fact, my lord, in her abduction he aided, hoping that information of her whereabouts would be of benefit to her friends—and himself."

Itti-Bel paused, and Talmai bent a glowering look upon him.

"Make haste, Ionian," he said. "Thou shalt see that I am not ungrateful."

"There is one following us, my lord, and if I mistake not it is this same priest of Nebo."

Talmai and Itti-Bel stopped and looked back. They were in the Court of the Courtiers, which, strangely, was deserted except by themselves and the oncoming priest.

"Haste thee, friend of Omar!" he cried, waving with the long sleeve of his robe in the direction of the passage which led to the Chamber of Divination. "His gods have warned the Eridan, and he is before thee."

"To the Chamber of Divination, my lord!" cried Itti-Bel.

Talmai broke into a run, Itti-Bel and the friendly priest following. Straightway he sped into the narrow passage between the court and the Chamber of Divination. Both entrances were curtained, and in the obscurity his cloak caught upon the stone wing of one of the lions whose carved body decorated the side of the wall. He fell heavily to the tesselated floor, his weapons making a loud noise as they came in contact with the marble pavement. Itti-Bel stopped to help him rise. The priest ran past them. On his feet, Talmai felt to ascertain if his swords were in place and hurried on, but before they gained the curtain behind which the priest of Nebo disappeared they heard the voices of men in fierce altercation. Thrusting aside the hangings, they beheld two men struggling, and at a glance they recognised the old priest of Eridu, endeavouring to tear himself loose from the priest of Nebo. They jostled against the gilded heroic figure of the goddess, and Talmai's eyes caught the shimmer of a long dagger as it descended into the back of the priest of Nebo.

"Traitor!"

Well did the Nabathean know that harsh voice, and with uplifted sword he leaped forward to hush it forever.

Dagon turned like a rat for the wall. He pressed a spring, a panel slid aside and he precipitated himself into the dark opening which closed behind him just as Talmai's sword descended upon the spot where he had been.

"'Tis the entrance to the room where Sherah is held captive," Itti-Bel exclaimed, and dropping on his knees the lad searched feverishly for a mark in the carving of which he had been informed by the priest of Nebo. Talmai lifted the hand of the priest. It was lifeless. Dagon had driven his dagger into his opponent's heart.

"I cannot find the spring." Itti-Bel's voice was sharp with disappointment. "The priest——"

"Flee, rebels, and accursed of the gods!"

A shrill voice issuing from the lips of the goddess cut off his speech. Itti-Bel heard in terror of heart. "Zeus!" he cried. "The goddess speaks!"

"Flee, rebels, and accursed of the gods!" The words came again, and Talmai recognised the old priest's voice.

"Oh, Zeus, father," moaned Itti-Bel, with his face to the floor.

"Flee, before the malediction of the gods fall upon thee!"

Talmai, inflamed with wrath, struck the statue a terrible blow upon the neck with his sword.

"Accursed, impostor!" he exclaimed. "Cease thy gibbering!" He hoped to penetrate the metal and decapitate the priest as he stood in the statue with his mouth to its lips. His sword rebounded and he was about to assail the image once more when from behind the wall, as from a long distance, he heard Sherah's screams.

"Help! Help!"

Talmai sprang into the air and caught the statue about the neck, exerting all his strength to hurl it from the massive stone pedestal, with the view of uncovering the

secret way in the wall which he knew Dagon must have used in gaining the interior of the image. The goddess was immovable. Again and again he tried, without avail. The gigantic figure was solidly fastened to the floor.

"I have found it, my lord!" shouted Itti-Bel in an ecstacy of excitement. "But the lady Sherah I no longer hear." He pushed a great slab of alabaster wainscoting aside as he spoke, and recoiled in fright.

There was the aperture into which the priest had vanished.

Without hesitation Talmai jumped through the opening. A faint light from above revealed to him a small room, but before he could glance about he heard the scream of a woman which was abruptly stifled as though a hand had been firmly pressed over the lips.

The scream came from above.

He perceived the situation. The secret chamber was the one from which the priests made their way by stairs up into the statue when it became necessary to announce a verbal decree of the goddess. The chamber also connected with the roof of the palace, and thither, Talmai at once surmised, Dagon, seizing Sherah, had fled. He quickly found the stairs, a winding shaft in an enormously thick party wall which, rising far above the general level of the palace roof, completely shut off from intrusion that corner which covered the king's household quarters. The stairway evidently had been made by the priests, and probably without the knowledge of the king. Burdened with Sherah, the oracle had not stopped to close behind him the sliding panel at the top, and, looking up, Talmai beheld a small square of blue heavens. A second later he was upon the roof of the king's private apartments.

There, at a short distance, he beheld Zirya the eunuch standing, sword in hand, one foot on the neck of the prostrate priest of Eridu, and watching the aperture in the wall as a hunter watches the mouth of a lion's den for the mate of the lion he has just slain. Besides them lay

Sherah, motionless, but the lithe body of the priest quivered with the tremours of exhausted nervous energy.

The gloomy face of Zirya lighted up when he saw Talmai. It was transfigured by some lofty emotion.

"He is mine, my brother," said Zirya, and Talmai put up his sword.

Near by was the crenellated parapet, by looking over which a person on the roof could look down into the Court of the Harem, a great, open quadrangle in the midst of that part of the palace where the king's family dwelt. From it there issued a scattering volume of smoke which diffused the cense of myrrh, and frankincense, and all sweet spices. The blue of the clear speckless vault of the sky shone with icy lustre.

"The king's sacrifice," thought Talmai, his attention involuntarily drawn to the smoke. Then he strode forward to rescue Sherah, but Itti-Bel ran ahead of him and dropped down beside her. She took the lad's hand in hers and, motioning to where Zirya stood silhouetted against the gray fumes rolling up from the court, averted her face and waited for the close of the tragedy which she felt to be inevitable. Standing beside them, Talmai also waited, but watched.

"The gods are kind," continued Zirya in a passionless voice, which nevertheless pierced the soul of the oracle. "They filled my measure, and now it overflows. My brother, thou shalt see how a king of Assyria can die. Thou, oh priest," and Zirya's voice grew stronger, fuller, "thou a partaker shalt be in a sacrifice of thine own ordering."

Dagon writhed under the heavy heel of the eunuch. The words needed no interpretation. He darted furtive glances this side and that. Zirya stooped and clutched him firmly about his neck gear.

"The curse of Mamit be upon thee!" screamed the priest, when he felt the irresistible clasp. "May Anu and Rimmon blast thee with the curse!"

"Save thy curses, priest," answered Zirya, with the

voice of fate. He dragged the priest to his knees and forced his face forward so that Dagon must look over the parapet into the harem court.

"Behold the sacrifice, priest."

The words were low and solemn. There was no anger in them. Dagon shuddered and clutched the edge of the parapet with his long sinewy hands. He riveted his gaze upon the scene in the court. It held him fascinated.

"Behold, my brother."

Talmai stepped near. The clouds of incense had changed from gray to white and great billows of it were rising as from a wide mouthed pit.

"Feast thine eyes, oh priest! Smell the sweet savour!"

With staring eyes the oracle looked. In the centre of the court, from the four walls, rose a huge pyramidal pyre, and on the apex of the pyre was a canopied throne of gold, and on this throne in his royal robes sat Sin-sar-iskun. Below him, on the long terraces of the sacrificial pile, were bestowed his household—his women, his children, his slaves, chosen men of his guard, and the noblemen who sought death with their master rather than life at the hands of the enemy. Incense curled up about him, flickeringly, ever and anon obscuring him. From his face all trace of weakness and doubt was gone, and in its stead was the imperial majesty of his line and his race. His inscrutable gaze was fixed upon the rising disk of day, and his lips moved in prayer. The gods alone could conquer the son of Sargon, Sennacherib, and Assurbanipal. The enemy at the gate was but the instrument of the gods. At his feet crouched a woman whose nerveless hands still clutched his knees.

The throne was upon a high pedestal, and pedestal and canopy were covered with woven emblems which glittered with threads of gold and sparkled with imperial gems. The pyre was composed of all the remaining treasures of the king: the costly furniture and priceless hangings of the vast range of royal apartments, the stored

bales and chests of kingly apparel and rarest vesture of women, boxes of golden bars and countless jars of refined silver, the gems and ornaments and matchless jewelry and exquisite carvings collected by his ancestors; all the possessions and goods left to him had Sin-sar-iskun heaped in one heap for the ultimate offering to the gods.

On the terrace below the throne, surrounded by the garlands and the jewelled robes with which they had clothed themselves, but discarded when the heat made them unbearable, were the women and children of the king, their bodies shining dully like dimmed alabaster. Some were still in death, some kept their straining eyes upon the king and prayed inarticulately with swollen tongue, others sprawled upon the drapery of the terrace and with twitching limbs and clawing fingers slowly succumbed to asphyxia.

On the edge of the next terrace, forming a wall of bronze about the monarch they long had served, stood the favoured guardsmen of the royal person, in full panoply, grim, erect, impassive. Over the weapons they bore, their conical helmets and their shirts of mail, ran little ripples of light from the fire which glowed luridly beneath them, but had not yet blossomed into flame. The smoke curled and writhed about the warriors, and vacancies here and there indicated that a few of the stolid square already had fallen, asphyxiated, their bodies mingling with the prostrate princes and great men on the terrace beneath. The sombre silence of suffocation brooded over all, and the confusion of the conflict without sounded far away and unreal. The flames crawled upward with crackle and spurt from the base of the pyre, thrusting forth fiery tentacles, and catching hold on beautiful fabrics or rare woods, leaping from broidered robes of state to hangings heavy with gems, glistening in golden urns or flashing from polished silver, licking with myriad tongues before devouring them the treasures of the king, and ever crawling nearer to him.

Sin-sar-iskun prayed aloud that his offering might appease the wrath of his gods:

"O sun-god, great lord, I beseech thee, O god of fixed destiny, remove my sin. Show mercy to thy city Nineveh, O god. They look up to thee. Show unto them mercy. Reject not the hands that are raised to thee."

There, piled in one grand funeral pile, were all the riches of the Great King and there, dying with him, were the human beings who clung to Sin-sar-iskun and his fortunes, and with him took the road from whose passage there is no return; princes and noblemen, soldiers and eunuchs, queens and concubines, all the servants of the Great King, and, best beloved of all, Istar-bela, she who clung to his feet. It was his last offering to the great gods to save his people.

"Look well, thou holy one!" said Zirya in a low, tense voice. "Look well!"

"O lord, turn thy face to me," prayed the king. "O goddess, accept my prayer. Forgive my sins. May thy ban be removed."

"Is the offering to thy liking, priest?" asked Zirya. "Would not the vizier of the Great King have appeased the gods? See where lies that once mighty prince!"

Dagon replied not, yet his gaze traversed the groups of dead and dying until it lighted upon the inert nobleman.

"Or would not the tender flesh of the first-born satisfy the gods? Behold! Eridan, the bodies of the innocent! A pure sacrifice, O priest, is it not?"

The priest's lips moved not, but his eyes dwelt on the naked children, where they writhed in the growing heat.

"O Sun-god stand still and hear me!" prayed the king. "Speak, O Sun-god, mighty lord, and bid the evil enchantment be at rest."

"Behold where the Fire-god the limbs of the Great King's women caress, priest," continued Zirya, in the same acrid, metallic voice. "Was there no other propitiatory offering? The flames of the sacrifice rise,

Dagon. Soon all that is royal will be consumed on the altar. Behold! toward the favourite of the king they dart!"

The increasing loudness of the roar of the flames compelled Zirya to raise his voice. The uproar of the conflict without was drowned by the roar of the conflagration in the court.

Still the priest replied not. The pupils of his eyes had contracted to pinpoints in the glare.

Istar-bela moved. The Great King gazed straight before him, but his eyes saw not.

"How long, O lord of shade," the king murmured, "O shepherd who determinest destiny, how long?"

"Look well, son of Ea, and say if a priest thou seest among the victims," said Zirya. He waited, but the priest answered not though his gaze leaped from form to form in quest of the holy garb.

"No, Dagon, none is there. The Fire-god roars for a holy victim. Thou, great oracle, art the victim!"

The flames leaped into the ascendency and the smoke suddenly cleared away except where tongues of fire snapped off little gray puffs. The walls of the court reflected the heat and the head of the Great King dropped slowly forward. Istar-bela stirred no more, nor were any of the guards visible where they formerly stood.

"Come, Eridan, believer in the ancient sacrifice, prepare thou for the altar," said Zirya grimly. "The Fire-god cries aloud for a holy victim."

Zirya cast aside his sword and laid his other hand on the priest's collar.

"Mercy, Zirya, mercy!" he shouted in a frenzy of fear.

The eunuch's hands closed over his throat.

"Do not disturb the Great King," said Zirya.

The piercing cry had fallen upon deaf ears.

Sitting firmly on his throne but with his head sunk on his breast, the king heard no earthly sound. The

flames were spreading along the tapestry of the pedestal, while all below was a raging furnace.

Zirya lifted the priest high in the air and held him where he could behold the fiery pit in its intensity.

"It is thy altar, O priest," said Zirya. His powerful arms, from which the sleeves had fallen away, were rigid as bronze.

The oracle was silent. He beheld death beckoning to him. Horror or resignation sealed his lips.

"Go! Dagon, to thy gods go!" And Zirya with a superhuman effort hurled the priest of Eridu far into the burning crater. One wild scream was all they heard, and then the flames received Dagon and closed over him.

Zirya gazed for a second where the priest had disappeared. Then he directed his face toward the motionless form of the king, and, crossing his hands upon his breast, he thus addressed the dead:

"My lord, what thou gavest me to do I have performed. The altar was erected, the sacrifice prepared, and the fires lighted as thou didst command. I have kept watch and ward to the end. Not far on the road to the house of darkness wilt thou be, O my master, ere I overtake thee."

With head inclined Zirya waited as if for answering words.

"Nay, my brother," said Talmai. "Live."

"It cannot be, son of Mathan. Here ends my life. When my lord the king is no more than ashes I, too, will become part of the holocaust. Thy destiny can be read without consulting the stars, and for thee I rejoice. A final favour at thy hands I ask. Lead here no soldiers until the Fire-god has done his work and the sacrifice is complete, though the flames burn, and the fire smoulder for days."

"I promise thee, my brother."

They clasped hands and looked into each other's souls.

"Farewell," said Talmai, and, stepping back where

Sherah was, he assisted her to her feet, and the three walked to the door in the wall. There Talmai turned and looked back. Zirya lifted his hand in farewell. Then they passed down the dark stairs.

"A noble man, my lord," said Itti-Bel.

Chapter L

THE ESCAPE FROM THE MOUND—DEATH OF ITTI-BEL

AT the palace gate the captain on guard, recognising Talmai as the man with the king's signet, followed him out and asked if their lord and king was well.

"He is well," replied the Nabathean.

"Forgive me, my lord," persisted the officer, who apprehended that Talmai was a man of importance, "if the great king would but turn his face toward his people—"

He hesitated. He meant that the defenders of the king's citadel would feel encouraged if the king showed himself, instead of remaining shut up in the harem.

Something in the officer's tone of voice pleased Talmai, who perceived that the man was devoted to the king.

"Guard well this gate until my return," said he.

"Here will I remain," was the rejoinder.

"So be it." And the trio proceeded to the palace of Assurbanipal. The noise of the conflict was as fiercely vehement as at any time since the irruption of the allies. The resistance of the Assyrians was strenuous and bitter, and, though the enemy was pouring in by several gates, they determined to exhaust every defensive tactic before they took refuge on the walls, which were not only a barrier, but a strong fortress as well. Talmai knew from the battle cries that the Babylonians had also entered the city.

Itti-Bel stopped abruptly. He leaned forward, listening. His face lit up with a radiant expression. Joy beamed from his eyes.

"My lord! My lord!" he cried, in an ebullition of pleasure.

Talmai turned and looked at Itti-Bel. He was startled, not by the sudden call of his name, but by the exquisite beauty revealed in the lad's glowing face. He could hardly realise that it was Itti-Bel.

"Didst hear?" asked he, in a tremor.

Talmai smiled back at him. "There is much to hear," he said.

"That cry—there! again I hear it. It is a Greek shout! There are Greeks in the battle."

"It is probable, Itti-Bel. Among the allies are men of many people."

"Again, I hear it, distinctly. 'Zeus the Preserver!' is the cry. Yet one voice only do I hear."

"When the battle is over we will search out these Greeks. They may have tidings of thy sister."

A thoughtful look overspread Itti-Bel's face. "It may be," he answered.

They hurried on, when Talmai who had been observing Sherah closely saw that she was too weak to maintain the pace. He said nothing, but picked her up in his arms as if her weight was a trifle. She stirred uneasily for a second and then settled back in this position with a tired sigh of content.

"Dear Talmai," she said, "forgive my weakness—"

"Speak not of it, Sherah, my beloved."

"How soon may we depart from this mound?"

"We are now making for the underground passage by which we came here, the Passage of the Thieves."

They proceeded through the deserted courts and corridors of the palace, which they traversed without adventure, and came to Assurbanipal's sunken treasure chamber. There at last they were free of the turmoil of warring men.

"My beloved," said Sherah, "let me not burden thee. I can follow through the dark passage."

"Place thy arms around my neck," answered the Nabathean, softly. "The way is long and dark."

Talmai experienced no difficulty in finding the spring which moved the panel of stone, and he started boldly down the stairs of the subterranean corridor extending under the city streets to the house of Omar. Itti-Bel brought up the rear.

Sherah nestled her head upon Talmai's shoulder.

"I knew thou wouldst come," she said.

"I promised thee."

"Is it well with my father?"

"It is well, my beloved."

"Soon we will be with him, and in the warm and beautiful sunshine. I never before knew what it was to miss the sun."

Sherah shuddered at the recollection of her captivity, and Talmai comforted her. She briefly narrated what had occurred during his absence, her abduction by priests and detention in the temple of Nebo. When the northern gate was broken the Oracle of Eridu and two companions had conducted her to the secret room behind the Chamber of Divination. She was not aware of the cause of the removal, however, until Talmai informed her. Though the priests had cared well for her, anxiety about her fate and the fate of those she loved had made her incarceration a period of acute torment. The motive for the abduction was not revealed, but on this score she needed little enlightenment; she was wanted either as an escaped Bride of Bel or for her connection with the loss of the sacred Amulet. Which, events would disclose. Thus the time passed in the tenebrious passage, and Itti-Bel, who was the only one who took note of distance, had just estimated that they were near the stairs that led upward into Omar's house, when, in a twinkling, without premonitory alarm, a thunderous noise smote their ears, and drove the blood from their hearts. In the narrow subterranean passage it reverberated as if

the rain-laden vault of heaven had given way and dropped an ocean of water in liquid mass upon the earth.

A wave of damp air struck Itti-Bel in the face.

"Run, my lord!" he cried. "The flood! The flood!"

The lad ran and pushed Talmai forward while the Nabathean was grasping his meaning.

Somewhere back of them the roof of the underground passage had yielded to the ever increasing weight of the water with which the entire city was being overrun. How far back they could not estimate, even if their minds were free to guess. They only knew that there was a compact body of water rushing toward them with torrent speed, and that if caught by it they would be swept off their feet and probably be dashed to death against the brick-lined wall of the tunnel.

Talmai leaped forward, and, chilled by the sense of a new danger, Sherah clung the more firmly to him. It was hard to die there, miserably drowned, where no strength of arm or cunning of brain would avail. What to do when the compressed volume of water struck them? There was but one means of escape from death —the panel in the house of Omar. There, too, were the steps leading from the level of the tunnel up to the panel. In the darkness he would run into and be hurled by his own momentum upon the sharp-edged stone. Sweat broke out upon him. The thundering roll of the water almost deafened him. He heard a scream from behind, as Itti-Bel was picked up by the advance wave, and then he himself was caught in its compelling embrace. Blindly he struggled in the engulfing flood until it hurled him and his burden forward and then shot them upward.

The first rush of the water had overtaken them at the foot of the stairs leading to Omar's house, and it dashed him with volcanic force against the wall of the room from which they three had descended into the underground passage a few weeks before. Immersed in the water, blinded and deafened by its roar, Talmai re-

tained his hold on Sherah, and, even when knocked senseless by impact with the wall, his arms still shielded her.

When Itti-Bel was cast upward his light body shot clear over the head of the Nabathean to the vaulted roof of the tunnel, which he struck slantwise. He scraped along the roof, and thus the force of his impact with the wall of the house was lessened. His quick wit told him where he was, and, as a drowning man clutches at straws, his fingers sought the spring which released the sliding panel, and found it.

In the brief interval between the advance wave and the main body of the flood Itti-Bel opened the hidden door and crawled through into the room beyond. His first thought was self-preservation, but looking back, he beheld the white face of Talmai near the aperture. He was insensible, and blood was streaming from a cut in the forehead. His arms still clasped Sherah.

Itti-Bel grasped him by the stout collar of his shirt of mail.

At that moment the flood came and lifted the two bodies into the opening whence Itti-Bel dragged them into the room. Fearing that they might be drowned where they were, he managed by a vigorous effort to move the panel back into place. Then he sank down exhausted, yet triumphant. Behind him he could hear the baffled water beating and surging against the stone partition, and it called to mind stories he had heard in his youth of wolves attacking shepherds in their stone huts. His memory flew back to his Ionian home—

But what was that noise in the apartment beyond? Some one, it seemed to him, was battering upon the door which faced the inner court of the house. And now that the roar of the torrent was out of his ears, he could distinguish, though faintly, the sounds of human conflict. Would they never cease slaughtering?

"Talmai!" he heard a feeble voice say. "Save me, Talmai!"

It was Sherah struggling to free herself. Itti-Bel

gently unloosened Talmai's hand, which made no resistance to him, and helped the Jewess to her feet.

"We are safe," he said to her, though he could not comprehend the meaning of the onslaught on the door. His calm tone had its effect upon Sherah, who put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Where are we, dear Itti-Bel?" she asked.

"In the home of thy father."

They were interrupted by a shout of exultation from the outside, which sounded loudly and distinctly through the thick walls and door. Confused talk was also audible, sharp, decisive, warlike. The sound penetrated the senses of Talmai, who moaned, and muttered restlessly.

Sherah was about to kneel by his side when a crash at the door startled them. Again, the exultant shout went up, and excited voices uttered loud words of encouragement. A second crash came, and Itti-Bel now perceived that the door was being attacked with a heavy beam improvised as a battering ram.

The sound conveyed a warning to the dulled intellect of the Nabathean, and each crash acted as a quickener.

"What means it?" Sherah asked Itti-Bel, in a frightened whisper.

"I know not," replied the lad. "Soon will we learn."

Talmai struggled to his feet and looked wildly around. They shuddered, for when his eyes lighted upon them there was no light of recognition in them.

While he thus stood, dazed or insane, they knew not, the door began to yield. He tottered toward it.

"My lord!" exclaimed Itti-Bel, intending to stay him.

Drawn insensibly toward the sound of strife, Talmai proceeded like one walking in his sleep.

Itti-Bel followed him.

The next crash sent the shattered door flying back upon its hinges, and the heavy beam with which it had been smashed narrowly missed striking Talmai. The men wielding it dropped it when their astonished gaze fell upon the pale specter that confronted them in the door-

way. The blood had coagulated about the wound on Talmai's forehead, and he presented a ghastly sight to the pillagers.

The glare of sunlight dazzled Itti-Bel, and he placed his hand over his eyes. Talmai walked out of the room, the men stepping aside in superstitious awe as he advanced. If he had borne a weapon in his hand they would have attacked him. The silence was broken by a fierce exclamation of anger and amazement.

"Zeus!" one of them ejaculated in Greek. "It is the Jew who wounded me in Babylon!"

He strode forward with sword pointed at Talmai's heart.

"Cleon!"

Itti-Bel ran in front of Talmai as Cleon lunged. The sword passed through the lad's body.

Appalled, Cleon drew back in horror. His eyes started from his head as Itti-Bel staggered, and fell limply upon the ground.

"It is I, Prisca," Itti-Bel gasped.

"Gods!" The Ephesian dropped his sword. He groaned, and his frame shook.

The spectators stirred not. Unseen by them a new set of participants in the tragedy were entering the court. Over the head of one a eunuch in royal apparel was holding the umbrella of state.

The shock of seeing Itti-Bel transfixed with a sword restored Talmai to his senses. His face took on, if possible, a whiter hue, and the coagulated blood on his forehead glistened. He drew his sword and stepped forward to where the horror-stricken Ephesian stood.

"Prisca!" Cleon moaned. "My beautiful Prisca!"

Talmai tapped him on the arm with his sword and pointed to the weapon the Ephesian had dropped.

The look of hatred ten times magnified returned to Cleon's face. "I see thee again!" he said, seizing his weapon, and making a deadly thrust.

Talmai parried it as he had done once before, in Baby-

lon, and gave rein to his fury. He beat down the Ionian's guard and thrust him through and through, catching his body on his sword as it lurched and when it could be held no longer he drew and thrust again, ere it fell to the ground.

The Ephesian died without uttering a word.

Sherah knelt beside Prisca and lifted her head.

"Speak, dear one," she pleaded. "Tell us thou wilt live."

Talmai stood and gazed at them, blankly.

Those who had just entered the court drew near, and those who were there before drew back respectfully.

Prisca's eyes opened slowly and with effort.

"My lord," she whispered so weakly that the words were barely audible, "I am no coward now, am I?"

A faint smile, the last effort of the old playful mood, flitted over her face.

"Not now, Itti-Bel," murmured Sherah.

Itti-Bel shivered with cold, and her brave spirit left her body.

Chapter LI

OMAR AND KHAR-MES—"IN FIVE DAYS"

SHERAH hung over Prisca, kissing her lips, and vainly calling when there could be no response. The blow the Nabathean had received in the tunnel had temporarily affected his brain, which, unnaturally excited to activity by the violent death of Prisca, was now undergoing the reaction. He gazed stupidly at Sherah and Prisca, seeing what was transpiring, but unable to form coherent conclusions.

"He knows us not, Omar," said Nebuchadnezzar, who was one of the new comers. The merchant's house was still safe from the rising flood, and the prince, after actively participating in the storming of the southern gate, had come to make it his headquarters within the walls. With him came his personal suite and also Kharmes the high priest of Babylon and a following of priests. Among the priests was Belshazzar the chamberlain.

Observing the priests, Sherah in fear bowed still lower over Prisca, to hide her face.

Omar bade his servants take care of the body of Prisca. The merchant then spoke to Talmai, who gave no answer.

"My lord, may I question these warriors?" he asked of Nebuchadnezzar.

"Do so, good Omar. There is mystery here."

The merchant summoned several of the men of the attacking party with Cleon.

"We are Turuki," explained one, "and allies of king Cyaxares. This morning the Ionian joined us in the onset. He said he was an officer of Prince Nebuzaradan on leave of absence from Ardiban. He fought well."

"What else said he of Prince Nebuzaradan?" interjected Nebuchadnezzar.

"Naught, great prince. He asked to join with us and fight. He fought bravely. By his hand many fell. When we came to this grand house he said 'We will go in and sack it.'"

"Saw you no seals?" Omar asked.

"Yes, my lord, but the Ionian knew none. The sealed bars on this door caused him to pick out this chamber as the treasure room, and we set upon it."

"Once it was," said Omar with dry pleasure. "My lord," he said to Nebuchadnezzar, "these men should be punished for breaking the seal of the Egibi, yet my heart is softened, and I pray that they may go in freedom."

"Be it so," responded Nebuchadnezzar, and the Turuki were released. The body of Cleon was removed by them.

While the Turuki were explaining, Belshazzar whispered to Khar-mes. The hierarch stared eagerly at Talmai, and an expression stole over his face which boded evil for the Nabathean.

"Prince," said Khar-mes, "a word with thee."

"Great priest, what is thy pleasure?"

"This man, the slayer of the Ionian, I ask at thy hands."

Khar-mes spoke confidently, as one who possessed both power and right. Nebuchadnezzar did not reply at once. His thought was that the high priest indulged a passing caprice. His hesitation annoyed the Sakkanaku, who curtly ordered Belshazzar to take the Nabathean into custody.

Omar was thoroughly alarmed over the condition of Talmai, whom he watched nervously. The Nabathean seemed to be stupefied, yet his corrugated brow indicated the workings of a mental process. He stood hesitant, uncertain, and his eyes were fixed intently upon the ground. When Belshazzar approached him he paid no attention to the priest.

"Stay thy priest, Khar-mes," said the prince in a

cold, quiet tone. Khar-mes not caring to betray his eagerness, motioned Belshazzar to wait.

"Prince, my lord," began Omar, "thou knowest how dearly I hold the son of Mathan."

Nebuchadnezzar inclined his head.

"I crave leave to remove and care for the young prince, for a great calamity has befallen him."

A flood of light broke in upon Khar-mes. So it was this adopted son of the Egibi who was befriending the man that Belshazzar said had taken the Amulet of Bel from the Ephesian.

"My lord," he said brusquely, his choler beginning to rise, "I demand this man."

Nebuchadnezzar turned, and there was danger in the glance he gave Khar-mes. The priest had been an influential factor in elevating his father to the throne, but Nabopalassar had submitted where his son need not.

"In my heart, I will consider, great priest. At present he is my prisoner—"

"My lord!" exclaimed Khar-mes, his pale face crimsoning. "Behold! He wears the garb of the enemy."

Nebuchadnezzar noticed that Talmai was attired as an Assyrian.

"He is my prisoner," he nevertheless repeated.

Khar-mes was wise enough to restrain the exhibition of his anger. He said to the prince in an undertone: "The safety of thy throne, prince, is endangered while this man is free. I—"

"He is my prisoner," interrupted Nebuchadnezzar, motioning to his guard. Two of them stepped to the side of Talmai, who put his hand on his sword.

"May I speak with the prisoner, Prince?" asked Omar hastily. Nebuchadnezzar nodded.

Omar motioned the guards aside. They obeyed, and the merchant laid his hand on Talmai's arm.

"Dost know me, son of Mathan?" he whispered.

"I do," answered the Aramean, and Omar saw that the light of reason was returning to him.

"Feign thyself mad," Omar urged in a whisper, "else wilt thou fall into the hands of the high priest. Answer not anyone. I will make clear why thou wearest the garb of the enemy."

Talmai understood.

"Both those men do I denounce," Khar-mes said to Nebuchadnezzar. "They are conspirators against thee, prince."

"How knowest thou this thing which thou chargest?" asked Nebuchadnezzar.

The question embarrassed the priest. To reveal his motive for wishing possession of Talmai it would be necessary to tell more than he cared to divulge.

The merchant saw the opportunity for which he had been waiting. He realised the priest's predicament.

"My lord," said he, "it was the son of Mathan who, disguising himself as an Assyrian, entered the city and made a way for thy forces into Nineveh."

Nebuchadnezzar by his face showed that this information was new to him.

"When thou receivest the report thou wilt see that I speak truth," continued Omar. "In the night's fighting he received a wound which has caused his mind to wander. A few days care will restore him. This I ask from thee as a reward for his night's work."

"It is granted."

Khar-mes was about to utter a protest when Omar addressed him.

"Great priest," he said with precise deliberation, "for five days I ask thee to waive thy objections. Before five days have passed I will place in thy hand as security for the loyalty of the son of Mathan a certain amulet which is more precious than the wealth of the Egibi."

"Thou!"

"I have said it. On the word of an Egibi I repeat it."

The high priest was silent from anger or astonishment. At last he said, meaningly: "The business of the Egibi reaches far. This time it may have reached too far."

"Dost consent, great priest?" asked Nebuchadnezzar.

"I do, my lord, for five days and no longer."

"If at the end of five days Omar has not approved the Nabathean's loyalty to me I will give him into thy hands Khar-mes."

The high priest cast a vindictive look upon Omar. The merchant regretted his rash offer. What might not happen to him while he was speeding to Ardiban for the Amulet of Bel, and returning with it to Nineveh? He had spoken hastily in placing a limit on his return. Nebuchadnezzar would live up to his word.

Chapter LII

THE DEFEAT AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

THE mission of Khar-mes was to anoint Nebuchadnezzar as joint king of Babylon, of Sumer and Accad, for since the prince's departure Nabopalassar was growing alarmingly weaker, and it was deemed advisable that the succession be assured. Had it been left with the priest to decide, he would have delayed the act, but Nebuchadnezzar was already exhibiting the strength of a master, and would brook no procrastination. Therefore as King Nebuchadnezzar, co-ruler with his father, was he proclaimed, albeit the pomp due the occasion was postponed until the formal taking of the hand of Bel in the temple of the royal city.

Nor had Nineveh yet been conquered. The allies had taken possession of the city, sacked it, and enslaved its citizens, but the remnant of the Assyrian army and the people who escaped capture still held the walls and defied the enemy. The royal mound, too, was still garrisoned by the Great King's troops, and for five days the combined armies watched a gradually diminishing column of smoke ascending from his palace, and speculated on the greatness of the sacrifice as measured in talents of frankincense and myrrh.

On the morning of the fifth day King Nebuchadnezzar held a levee in the palace near the southern gate inhabited by him previous to the capture of the city. It had been the suburban home of some great man of Nineveh and was profusely and richly ornamented in the gay and insistent colours distinctive of Assyrian decoration. The principal feature was a very large, open, marble-

tiled court which contained a fountain in a fish basin. The upper part of the walls was of glazed bricks in red, white, and yellow, striation, interspersed with lozenge-shaped ornaments, and the lower half was covered with bas-relief carvings in alabaster slabs divided into scenes by exquisitely executed scroll work. Fitted into each corner like a connecting hinge, was the conventional sacred tree embossed upon vitrified brick. A latticed gallery over the low doorway to the women's quarters commanded a full view of the court. The brilliantly garbed assemblage of noblemen, officers, and dependents gathered for the audience added a pleasant variety to the colour scheme.

The throne of Nebuchadnezzar was erected in a shallow alcove facing the main entrance, and elevated so that the monarch could survey the entire scene. From the wall high above him a canopy of white, green, and blue extended far out over the pavement to tall slender stanchions embedded in pillars of marble. Hangings of white, green, and blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings, formed the background of the throne. This awning not only shielded from the sun's rays, but defined an area which could be entered only by permission.

From filial respect Nebuchadnezzar abstained from the grandiose ceremonies of royalty, and his entrance into the court, preceded by Rimut and his guards, was unmarked save by the hush that ensued. Amytis, the young queen, walked by his side, and when he ascended the throne she seated herself in a chair of state on a lower dais, her maids grouping themselves about her. The guards, the noblemen of the household, the generals of the army, and certain others stood beside the throne. Eunuchs holding long fans of ostrich feathers gently stirred the air about the royal couple. The court, except in the near vicinity of the throne, was thronged with princes, officials, captains, and other men of rank or position.

Among those honoured with the privilege of standing near the king, in the shade of the canopy, was the vizier Arrabi, son of Yakin, chief of the Chaldeans, who had been hastily sent by Nabopalassar to advise Nebuchadnezzar in the first days of his kingship. His coming was opportune, as the distribution of the spoils of Nineveh required a man of experience and diplomacy, and his aid would be valuable in whatever negotiations might arise for settlement. His son, Musallin, was also there, and Iddin of the Egibi, companions of the tutelage of the prince. Chaldeans or Babylonians whose fortunes were bound up with those of the new dynasty and officers who were devoted to the royal family formed the majority of those present.

"Son of Yakin," said Nebuchadnezzar, "welcome art thou to our rough camp."

Arrabi bowed deeply.

"For thyself art thou welcome, and above all else because thou art my royal father's other self."

"Long may I live to serve him," replied the vizier.

Nebuchadnezzar next devoted considerable time to the reports of his officers relating to the provisioning of his troops and other matters connected with the army, and also heard cases that were brought before him by army-followers on appeal from his administrators.

"Thou hast heard in part the recital of the taking of the Assyrian city, son of Yakin," he said, when these matters were disposed of, "but not all. It is well thou shouldst learn to whom is due the chief honours. Listen, Oh vizier. For two years the walls of Nineveh we assaulted, and for two years were we driven back. No warriors more courageous than the Medes under the gallant Cyaxares—no warriors more courageous than our own Babylonians. A stranger prince, a vassal of my father, appeared with his army and begged permission to join us. Soothsayers declare that with him came the divine Lady of the Magic Wand and guided him into Nineveh. Far be it from me to doubt the wisdom and

the goodness of the gods. My spies tell me an unknown disguised warrior showed him where to dig under the northern wall. Mayhap it was the Divine Lady in man's guise. Be that as it may, the prince forced an entrance and held the northern gate until our armies gained a strong foothold within the walls. What reward should be the stranger's recompense, Oh vizier?"

Now Arrabi had arrived only the night previous, and the details of the capture of the city were to him a mass of rumours.

"If a royal subject of thy father, O king," he answered gravely "the prince should receive thy gratitude and friendship."

A murmur of approval was heard in the court.

"And after that, O vizier?"

"After that, O king, inasmuch as he shared not the full vigil of the siege, he should receive, for himself, his captains, and his warriors, one-tenth of all the Babylonian portion of the spoil. Doubtless the Divine Lady of the Magic Wand, who so long withheld his arm, will complete for him the portion."

There were covert smiles exchanged among those who knew the nobleman and understood his sarcastic reference to the goddess. They interpreted his speech as just, but unfriendly toward the stranger.

"Thou hast said it," rejoined Nebuchadnezzar. "On his loyalty depends all. Of disloyalty is he accused, and also of an act of sacrilege—the abduction of a Bride of Bel."

On Arrabi's brow the wrinkles doubled.

"Who is his accuser, my lord?"

"Khar-mes the great high priest."

Arrabi's face grew red at the mention of the name of his enemy.

"The sakkanaku has his reasons," was his diplomatic answer. "Where is this prince?"

"Bring hither the Nabathean," Rimut was commanded.

While the captain of the guard was away Nebuchad-

nezzar sent for Urman the Gambalian and Banu-sin the Pekod, who were in the court. They joined the circle near the throne without being told why they were summoned. At the same time a guardsman brought word to the throne that Prince Nebuzaradan sought audience.

"Admit him," said the king.

The Babylonian prince, in golden armour, attended only by his scribe, Iba, entered and, after the customary salutations, advanced to the foot of the throne and bowed his face to the king's feet.

"Welcome, my cousin," said Nebuchadnezzar.

"My lord summoned me," responded Nebuzaradan, "I am here, and I am my lord's servant."

Rimut entering with Talmai created a stir, for there was much talk of the Nabathean. He was clad for the occasion, and his armor glittered with gold.

"Knowest thou this man?" Nebuchadnezzar asked of Nebuzaradan.

"He is Talmai, the son of Mathan, my lord. Mathan, the Nabathean king, is in my charge at Ardiban. I know this man as a mighty warrior and a loyal servant of thy father."

"Rimut, is thy prisoner restored to health?"

"Perfectly, great king," answered Rimut.

Nebuchadnezzar said nothing, and there was a momentary silence when Urman stepped forward and craved permission to speak.

"Speak thy word, brave Gambalian," said the king.

"My lord," said the blunt warrior, "our Arameans murmur because our prince is held here—"

Nebuchadnezzar held up his hand for silence.

"Remain, Gambalian," he said. "How left you our army on the Khosr, cousin?" he asked of Nebuzaradan.

"In all other things well, my lord, but pining for the sight of an Egyptian."

"Thou hast been ill?"

"A fever, Nebuchadnezzar, which is apt to attack soldiers in idleness. I am now fully recovered."

Nebuchadnezzar looked sternly into his eyes and said:

"May it not attack thee again, my cousin, lest it cause thee to forget thy duty and send thee to thy salt marshes in Chaldea for the remainder of thy life."

Nebuzaradan bowed deeply.

"The fever attacks but once, my lord."

"To-morrow return to thy post." With this Nebuchadnezzar dismissed the subject and called upon Rimut to report the condition of affairs in the city.

"The embankment above the northern angle of the wall was cut last night as thou didst direct, my lord. The waters of the Tigris are now running in the old channel which was used when the walls of Nineveh were rebuilt by Sennacherib. The water in the city is subsiding and running off through the drains. By to-morrow, except for pools, the city will be clear of water, and the attack on the walls can be begun both on the inside and outside. The enemy on the walls cannot hold out much longer."

"Does the royal mound show any signs of weakness from the water?"

"None is visible, my lord. All the houses of the city except those with stone foundations have dissolved and vanished."

"We may soon capture the walls," said Nebuchadnezzar thoughtfully, "but the mound where Sin-sar-iskun is confined may withstand us for moons."

Talmai had been advised of the progress of events by Rimut. He knew that after a most desperate resistance, during which large supplies of food were carried to the summit of the walls, the Assyrians fled to this circumvallating stronghold, cut off all means of communication with the ground, and resisted every attack with frantic courage. Daily he expected to hear that the underground passage between Omar's house and the royal mound had been discovered and advantage taken of it, but, as no such announcement was made, he

concluded that the break in it was concealed by the inundant waters of the Tigris. Therefore he spoke.

"Great prince," said he, "set me not down in the tablets as a boaster and vainglorious, but if I have thy permission and a few thousand of my Arameans, I engage to take the mound before the next sun rises."

The speech created a sensation, though there was little outward evidence of it. The Gambalian alone spoke.

"My life upon it, my lord, the son of Mathan will do as his words say."

"I will hear thee when thy accuser is come, Nabathean. Behold! he approaches," said the king.

"Be of good courage, brave prince," said Amytis.

"My heart will fail not."

The great high priest now entered the court, attended as usual by priests, and in their midst Talmai recognised three persons, Belshazzar the chamberlain, the lady Harimtu, and Barak her steward. Khar-mes advanced confidently, with anticipated triumph stamped on his face. He bowed to the king as he came forward, waiting for no summons, and bowed again as he took a place near the throne.

"It is thy hour, great priest," said Nebuchadnezzar.

"To thy throne I come for justice, Nebuchadnezzar," he responded with an affectation of humility. "The god Ea upon our fathers bestowed certain laws which neither prince nor priest may transgress. Beyond those laws I go not."

"Nor I, great priest," said the king.

"This Nabathean, Talmai the son of Mathan, is disloyal to thee. Bravely has he fought, glory to thy arms has he added, and thou dost hesitate to see in him the traitor and the rebel. Does the king still demand proof?"

"To the law thou hast appealed, Khar-mes. No judge in Babylon condemns without hearing."

"Send men out on the road to hasten Omar the son of Egibi," said Amytis in an undertone to Rimut. "The midhour is nigh."

"My lord," Khar-mes began, "this woman is Harimtu the daughter of Ina the slave dealer."

The lady Harimtu took a step forward and bowed to the tiles. Queen Amytis looked her over curiously. The celebrated courtesan was regally beautiful.

"The lady Harimtu had a daughter whom the gods had endowed with surpassing beauty, a beauty which caused her to be chosen by the great god Bel for his harem."

The vizier smiled.

"On the night in which she was to be installed in the house of purification, my lord, she was by this Nabathean abducted. For this indictment have I witnesses. Step forth Belshazzar."

The chamberlain stood forth and bowed.

"Is it not true that the daughter of Harimtu was chosen a Bride of Bel?"

"It is true, great priest."

"Is it not true that on the night she was to be installed in the house of purification she was abducted by this Nabathean?"

"It is true, my lord."

"Step forth, Harimtu. Are my words true?"

"All of them, my lord."

"Step forth Barak son of Nathan. Are my words truth?"

"All of them, great priest."

"When the Nabathean spirited her away he did place her in the care of one whom I will denounce in his time, my lord. Our watchfulness did he evade until he reached Hillat. Alone, this brave Barak would have captured him had not the Gambalian, Urman the son of Dunanu, backed by a strong force, prevented."

"My lord, my lord," broke in Urman. Nebuchadnezzar motioned for silence. The son of Dunanu muttered to himself, but said no more.

"To the southern gate of the royal city we pursued

them, where by sudden onslaught they surprised the guard and slew eight of thy father's warriors."

Khar-mes looked keenly into Nebuchadnezzar's face, where harsh lines were forming about the mouth.

"They were followed into the country by Babylonian troops led by Belshazzar my chamberlain. The troops pursuing the rebels came upon them the same day, and would have captured or killed them, but for the arrival of reinforcements led by Bani-ya and Banu-sin, the Pekods, and in the fight which ensued Belshazzar was wounded, and over thirty of thy father's warriors were slain. The rebels then escaped."

Khar-mes again paused to watch the effect of his words. He noted with satisfaction that the upright line between Nebuchadnezzar's eyes was strongly marked. Upon the other auditors the association of the heroes of Nineveh in deadly affrays with Babylonians had an evil sound.

Talmai to all appearance gave no heed to the priest. Urman was purple with suppressed rage, while the young Pekod looked appealingly at Nebuchadnezzar for the privilege of speech.

"Once again were the rebels heard of, my lord," continued Khar-mes, "before they appeared here, together with an army of 12,000 warriors. They are combined not so much against the Assyrians as against thee. And, my lord," and Khar-mes's voice became harsher, "the Bride of Bel also is here. She was in the house of Omar, the son of Egibi, when first I learned of her presence, but when my priests went there to seize her, she was gone.

"Judge between us, my lord."

The young king cast a maleficent eye upon Talmai

Amytis whispered to one of her maids, who silently withdrew.

"My lord," she said softly to the king. The stern lines in his face departed.

"Speak what is in thy mind, my queen."

The interruption was followed by a general movement in the royal circle as men and women shifted their position. It was not to be doubted that Khar-mes's arraignment told in few straightforward words, and so palpably susceptible of proof or disproof, had influenced his hearers against the Arameans. Those near them moved a little way off, and they drew a little closer to each other. Talmai looked at the lessening shadow. What could have happened to Omar?

"Tell me, Khar-mes, what is the law of the god's harem?" asked the queen. "May any maiden be chosen?"

"Not any, queen. One is chosen each year, and she must be a native-born Babylonian," the priest answered, with a courteous salutation.

"The daughter of a foreigner born in Babylon while he was sojourning there could not be chosen?"

"She could not, queen. Her ancestors must have been Babylonian."

"Such is the law, great priest?"

"Such is the command from the great god, noble lady."

In the meantime the queen's maid had returned, leading by the hand a superbly gowned woman, wearing a veil, which though it concealed the identity of the wearer, betrayed her youth and grace. Talmai's sight penetrated the veil, and he saw that the woman was Sherah.

On a sign from Amytis the maid led the veiled one to where the queen sat, drew back the flimsy curtain, and exposed to the beholders the entrancingly lovely face of the Jewess, not clouded with care, but radiant with joyful hope and tender with love's solicitude, for her beautiful eyes rested on Talmai's face. She saw no one else, not the dreaded Khar-mes nor the woman she once called mistress. The sunshine nestled in her hair, and it glistened like threads of fine bronze.

"Is this thy Bride of Bel, great priest?" asked the queen.

Khar-mes had long passed the time when he could be surprised. He concentrated his gaze on the virginal countenance of the Jewess and said slowly:

"It is she—the daughter of Harimtu."

"And thou, daughter of the slave dealer," addressing Harimtu with that singular and fine change of tone which the keen ear notes when a woman turns her attention from a man to one of her sex.

"My adopted daughter is she, noble lady," Harimtu answered.

"Adopted?" interjected Nebuchadnezzar.

"Not even adopted, my lord," replied Amytis, "as thou shalt presently know. This young woman whom they name Shaghulla is Sherah the daughter of a Jew."

Khar-mes made a slight genuflection as if he would say: "The queen's words are not to be disputed, yet they alter not the truth."

Harimtu gave a little stifled exclamation. She knew then how Nebuchadnezzar would decide the case.

Barak, somber, timid, shrunk further back, as if to elude the questioning of the queen, for he knew her words were words of truth.

Across the chasm of decorum Talmai and Sherah gazed into each other's eyes.

"How came this knowledge to thee, my queen?" asked Nebuchadnezzar.

"From the father's lips, my lord. He was born a Jew, but married a Babylonian woman who gave birth to their daughter, this maiden, while they were sojourning in Babylon. Afterwards she was stolen from his home near Jerusalem and sold to Ina, the slave dealer, who gave her to his daughter Harimtu. When he lost his only child the father left his home and his people and was adopted into the family of his dead wife. Recently he recovered her. Five days ago he started on a long

journey, and before departing he came and asked me to care for her until his return. The same request came from the young prince to whom her father has betrothed her."

Khar-mes realised that what the queen said was true. The stars had told him the maiden was born in Babylon, but that was all. The queen's story filled out the blanks in Harimtu's knowledge of her origin. He was proud and obstinate, but wise.

Nebuchadnezzar was angered at Harimtu, whom he suspected of deliberate fraud. He felt that she was standing in the way of the queen's wish. He had sufficient faith in the high priest's integrity to acquit him of any intrigue.

A messenger whispered to the king's chief eunuch, and the eunuch with the privilege of his class spoke to Nebuchadnezzar.

"Omar, the son of Egibi, requests speech with the king."

The words relieved the situation.

"Admit him," the king commanded.

The merchant, leaning on the arm of Jehu, yet stately and commanding in his rich robe of dark purple and cloak of pure white, advanced slowly.

"It is the father, my lord," said Amytis.

Sherah forgot etiquette and hurried to his side, but not ahead of Talmai, and to them Jehu confided his master.

"It is well, my children," said he.

Iddin, the cadet of the Egibi, stepped forward and raised the hem of Omar's robe to his lips.

The shadow on the tiled floor marked the mid hour of the day.

"A difficult task hast thou, Omar, after thy journey," said Nebuchadnezzar. "Thou saidst thou would prove the Nabathean's loyalty."

"My way back and forth was a way beset with hardships, my lord," he responded. "The streams which a

short time ago were rills and pools now are raging rivers. Twice would I have been swept away, but for my good Jehu." Turning suddenly to Khar-mes, he added: "It was to Ardiban I went."

In the high priest's eye Omar read guilt, and he needed no further confirmation of his suspicion that had his road been to Babylon he would have been waylaid on his return by Khar-mes's agents to obtain possession of the Amulet. The priest had no thought but that Babylon was his goal.

Withdrawing himself from the sustaining arms of Talmai and Sherah, and removing the cloak from his shoulders, Omar, faced the king, the court, and the high priest. Suspended by a flexible chain of gold bars around his neck, there rested on his breast a great ruby, which drank in the sunshine and sent forth the filtered rays in flashes of crimson light.

"My lord," he began, while his hearers stared in wonder at the lustrous stone—never in the treasuries of the kings had been seen such a jewel—"I know not the accusation the great high priest has made against the Nabathean prince. Is it the pleasure of the king to listen now?"

"It is the hour."

"This, my lord, is Sherah, my daughter. I have told thee somewhat of the history of her abduction and her sale to a slave dealer. First I would ask Khar-mes a question."

"It is thy right, Omar," said the king. Khar-mes, with his eyes riveted upon the ruby, whose coruscant beams fascinated and held him, answered nothing.

"I would know from thee, priest," Omar said to him in a firm voice, "if thou still claimest this woman as a Bride of Bel. She is thy daughter, and by the virtue of followed by thy priests, or for some other object?"

Khar-mes understood the threat conveyed in the two questions. He must acknowledge that Talmai's abduc-

tion of the Bride of Bel was his offence or Omar would expose the loss of the Amulet from the temple of Bel. For there, on Omar's breast, was the Amulet.

The merchant saw his hesitation. He raised his hand to denounce him. Khar-mes decided to surrender.

"From the lips of the queen I have just learned the nativity of this woman," said he. "She can not be a Bride of Bel. She is thy daughter, and by the virtue of my office I hereby renounce all claim upon her person."

With a cry of relief, Sherah put her arms around her father's neck, and the merchant pressed her to his heart. The queen's face glowed with pleasure, but Nebuchadnezzar's face lost none of its sternness. Harimtu and Barak stared at the haughty hierarch.

"My lord," continued Omar, "it now remains to clear the Prince of the Nabatheans."

"It is charged, son of Egibi, that soldiers of my father have been slain by his hands," said Nebuchadnezzar, the line between his eyes deepening. "In this the high priest has implicated Urman the Gambalian and the prince of the Pekods."

"This is the only contention worthy of thy consideration, my lord," rejoined Omar. And, giving Khar-mes a meanacing look, he added, "Unless sacrilege has been committed."

He then went into a detailed account of the adventures of the Nabathean, from the moment of the chance encounter in the streets of Babylon to the escape to the marshes, omitting all reference to the Amulet of Bel. He lauded Talmai's chivalry and prowess, asserted that the Babylonian soldiers had been misled by the priests, and claimed in extenuation that he had the right of self defence unless it was the king who ordered the arrest. Finally, to test the intent of the high priest, he referred this strained point in extenuation to him.

"The right of self defence is denied no man," Khar-mes admitted, still eyeing the great ruby.

The warm praise of the valour of the Nabathean and

his companions, coming from a Babylonian—for such Omar was to them—dispelled the feelings of resentment which Khar-mes's speech had raised in the minds of his hearers, and they were mentally prepared for the next contention of Omar. "The Gambalian and the Pekods merely assisted a friend. They have been and are loyal and proven vassals of thy father, and there was no intent of rebellion. As my lord knows, Bani-ya the Pekod lost his life in my lord's service. This is a matter to be dismissed as unfortunate brawls between soldiers are dismissed, if my lord will see with my eyes. Of their conduct in the capture of the city of Nineveh—"

"This is something of which I am fully aware," Nebuchadnezzar interrupted. "It is to be weighed in the balance. What sayst thou, great priest, of these developments?"

All eyes were turned upon Khar-mes, who was known for his stiffnecked pride. What would he say in answer? The Babylonians delighted in arguments, verbal contests, puns, odd turns of thought and speech. The eager auditors, especially the priests, expected to hear the transparent excuses of Omar torn into tatters.

"Only the gods are perfect," he began. "Man with his dull senses attempts to catch their meaning, to interpret their voices. The stars reveal much, conceal much. They let me know that the daughter of Omar the Wise was born in Babylon, but told me not that she was a Jewess."

The quiet tone of the priest, approaching even to humility, amazed the Babylonians.

"I see in these revelations," he continued, inspiring himself by another glance at the Amulet, "a punishment inflicted upon me by the great gods. Yet, my lord, from profanation of the harem of Bel they held back my hand, and at the moment I in my blindness would have placed the Jewess in the house of purification, Ea the heart knower and Shamas who sees the deeds of men brought forward the Nabathean and saved me from sin. To me is it all now clear, my lord, and I petition to hold

guiltless this young man and his companions. Whatsoever was done by them was the will of the great gods."

Khar-mes said this with such mingling of frankness, generosity, and humility that he won a greater victory over the hearts of his hearers than if he had swayed their minds by the keenest reasoning. He felt this himself as he closed, and that not only had he gained a stronger hold over Nebuchadnezzar and Amytis, but that he had earned the Amulet of Bel, without which his tenure as high priest would soon become precarious.

The king's gratification over the result was intense, and the queen did not hesitate to betray her pleasure. She gave Khar-mes a smile of unfeigned good will, and summoning Sherah kissed her on the forehead.

Two persons, however, were dismayed, Harimtu and Barak. The ravishing beauty of the young Jewess inflamed the love of the steward. His memory floated over scenes in her youth when she clung to his neck and thrust her warm sweet hair against his bare throat. He remembered her as a girl and as a maiden, when wistful modesty and tender confidence marked their intercourse, and he recalled her face that night when she fled from Harimtu's house. Barak groaned inwardly, and moved away from Harimtu, who, as she saw the climax approaching, instinctively drew closer to him. Omar chanced to observe this movement and counter movement.

Nebuchadnezzar spoke: "May the twenty-four judges guide my decision. May it satisfy the determiners of destiny. The petition of the wise shakkanaku is granted. The Jewess, Sherah, is returned to her father, and Talmai of the Nabatheans, Urman of the Gambalians, and the Pekod princes, their servants and soldiers, are guiltless of blood under the law of my father, the king."

There was a little ripple of excitement and but for the presence of the king and queen the demonstration would have been one of noisy congratulation. Khar-mes alone spoke.

"The king's judgment is just," said he. "May it be proclaimed."

"Thou hast heard, son of Yakin," the king said to the Chief of Chaldeans. "What should be the reward of Talmai of the Nabatheans and his companions, who opened the gates of Nineveh for the king?"

"Thy friendship, my lord. After that, one-tenth of thy spoil."

"Once while hunting, Chaldean, I was hard beset by two savage lions. If timely assistance had not arrived, assuredly would I have been slain. That assistance was rendered by a stranger who, when he saw I was safe, disappeared. Lately I found him. Tell me, Arrabi, how should I honour him."

The courtiers forgot the Arameans, the high priest, the Bride of Bel. Who was the fortunate man to whom Nebuchadnezzar owed his life?

"My lord," responded the vizier, "there is no higher honour than thy friendship."

"Stand forth, son of Mathan," commanded the king.

Talmai walked to the front of the throne and raised his hands in the customary position of respect.

"This is he, my friends," said Nebuchadnezzar.

The murmur of astonishment and admiration passed the limits of etiquette. What honour, what position was too high or undeserved for such service?

The king arose from his throne and stepped down to where Talmai stood. He removed the chain of gold from his neck, bearing the stellar symbols of his rank, and placed it around the neck of the Nabathean. He took the royal signet ring from his finger and placed it on Talmai's index finger.

"Thus," said he, "I endow thy person with the sacredness of a king of Babylon. It will be recorded in the annals of my reign."

"My lord!" exclaimed Talmai, dropping upon one knee and lifting the hem of the king's robe to his lips.

"Further, son of Mathan, I have for thee not merely

a title but a kingdom. On the edge of the land of the Egyptian is a country rich in the blessings of the gods. Aduma is it called in the annals, but thy people name it Edom. Knowst thou the land?"

"My father was its king, my lord."

"And shall be its king again. There will I place thee as a bulwark against Egypt, thee and thy Arameans. From the spoil of Nineveh shall thy royalty be equipped, and my queen shall dower thy bride."

Nebuchadnezzar resumed his seat on the throne, and, sweeping his eye over the assemblage, he noted Harimtu and Barak standing by themselves, shunned by all.

"And what shall be done with the false witnesses?" he asked. No one spoke, and he added: "Their punishment will I leave to thee, son of Egibi, since it is thee and thine they would have injured."

A shadow of a smile flitted over Omar's face as he saw the instinctive leaning of Harimtu toward Barak, and Barak's unconscious attitude of repulsion.

"Since it is for me to say, my lord," he continued, "and the king will judge my judgment, I decree that they marry each other."

The unique decision of the merchant met the fancy of the courtiers, many of whom had been guests of the woman, and Harimtu herself smiled. Barak raised his hand to protest, but the king ended the matter.

"Let it be done," he said.

He again addressed Talmai, who was in conversation with the queen and Sherah.

"There remains work for us, brother. The king of Assyria is still free."

"With thy permission, great king, I will set about the capture of the mound and the walls," responded Talmai.

"I leave it in thy hands." Directing his scribe to notify his generals to obey Talmai as they would himself, Nebuchadnezzar dissolved the audience and, with the queen, and her maids, and Sherah, withdrew.

"AND NINEVEH WAS LAID WASTE AND WAS OF OLD LIKE A POOL OF WATER."—*Page 439.*

Omar resumed his cloak, and, after exchanging a few words with Talmai, he joined Khar-mes, who was ostensibly preparing to depart, but was waiting for him.

"Is there peace between us, priest?" he asked.

"Peace and amity, son of Egibi. May there always be peace between us."

"I must tell thee, Khar-mes, that it was by chance the Amulet fell into our hands."

"I divined it. By the Ionian was it stolen, and by the Nabathean recovered in the street."

"Never was there intention of retaining it. It has served its purpose. It has met its mate—"

"The Blue Stone?"

"The Blue Stone. I return the Amulet to thee."

The high priest's hand trembled when he received the ruby.

"It is well," he said, and they parted.

The taking of the royal mound by Talmai and his men, who ascended through Assurbanipal's treasure vaults after the Thieves' Passage had been cleared out, the capture of the walls, and the apportionment of the spoil among the allies followed in rapid succession. They cast lots for her honourable men, and all her great men were bound in chains; the people were scattered, and no royal shepherd ever afterward gathered them. For Sin-sar-iskun and all his sons had perished in the final sacrifice, and, before the hand of the invader searched among the ruins of his sacrificial pyre for the remnants of his riches, the wind had scattered their dust. Then the conquerors defaced the marvellous wall sculptures wherein the proud Assyrians had engraved the record of their victories; fire devoured the palaces and strongholds, and Nineveh was laid waste and was of old like a pool of water.

THE END

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